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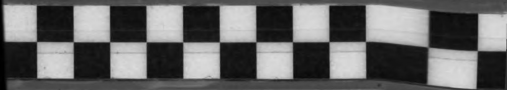
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**CHARLOTTE LOUISE QUINNEY**

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***WISCONSIN DEATH TRIP: AN EXCURSION INTO THE MIDWESTERN  
GOTHIC***

By

Charlotte Louise Quinney

A THESIS

Submitted to  
Michigan State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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## ABSTRACT

### *WISCONSIN DEATH TRIP: AN EXCURSION INTO THE MIDWESTERN GOTHIC*

By

Charlotte Louise Quinney

Deemed morbid treachery to the robust historical narrative and the plight of the democratic individual, *Wisconsin Death Trip* has been negated as little more than a cultural studies farce. Located within the context of historical events, such as the Panic of 1893, and the literary genres of naturalism and postmodernism, sensationalism and the avant-garde, Lesy's text is presented as deserving great scholarly attention. *Wisconsin Death Trip* is discussed as a gothic text, according to the theory of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject, and is located alongside literature and film of the Middle West including Glenway Wescott's *The Grandmothers* (1927), Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), Pope Brock's *Indiana Gothic* (1999), Harmony Korine's *Gummo* (1997), and Michael and Mark Polish's *Northfork* (2003). Collectively, these examples formulate a comprehensive theory of Midwestern Gothic which depicts the particular psychic and social attributes of a region which failed to provide many with the cultural rewards promised by the mythology of the rural idyll and the Old Republican ideal of a Jeffersonian ideology, Manifest Destiny and Turner's heady Frontier Thesis. Midwestern Gothic is characterized by visual rhetoric, the repressed secrets of the archive, monomania, insanity, and familial trauma, framed through the lens of the economy and national mythology.

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**“A Handbook of Inner Culture for External Barbarians”: An Introduction to  
the Ostracism, History, and Ideology of *Wisconsin Death Trip*.**

A voice from out the Future cries, “On! on!” – but o’er the Past  
(Dim Gulf!) my spirit hovering lies  
Mute, motionless, aghast!

Edgar Allan Poe, “To One in Paradise”

In 1857, Henry Hamilton Bennett traveled with his father and an uncle from Farnham, lower Canada, to Kilbourn City, Wisconsin, then the final destination of the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul railroad. In the spring of 1865, Bennett purchased the photography business of Leroy Gates at Kilbourn and began the practice of landscape photography. On the frontier, Mr. Bennett encountered eclectic characters who were to form the foundation of tales that would be told to the numerous visitors of Bennett’s studio. Recollections of his early experiences in the western country included anecdotes which, along with some of his pictures, were considered “somewhat of a fable” (Bennett 270). Bennett’s tales of the Wisconsin Dells included poisoned water, drowned lumbermen, a woman who killed her husband by pouring hot lead into his ears, a hermit whose house was destroyed by fire, and the superstitious and primitive behavior of the Winnebago Indians who “infested” the region (Bennett 269). Bennett formulated a technological and mythic infrastructure, whereby his development of photographic techniques and inventions intersected with the creation of local folk tales, to chronicle the land as “civilization began to creep into the western country” (Bennett 270).

The introduction of technological mechanisms on the frontier instilled apprehension in the native population that believed Bennett’s contraption would

steal the soul of the photographic subject. As historian A. C. Bennett recounts, “it appeared that some time before[,] an Indian had been photographed and shortly afterwards had died. It took a great deal of talking to convince them that the mystery of picture taking was not responsible for this Indian’s death” (270). In the 1890’s, photography was still regarded by the population as a “semi-magical act that symbolically dealt with time and mortality” (Lesy, *Wisconsin*), and in the small town of Black River Falls, Wisconsin, studio photographer Charles Van Shaick captured 30,000 images of Wisconsinites who have come to be perceived as historical ghosts whose tenuous nerves reverberated from the shock of steam power, electricity and technological development, conforming to George Beard’s 1881 declaration of American nervousness.<sup>1</sup>

The invasion of the ‘machine’ disturbed the traditional paradigm of the countryside as a bucolic retreat, unsettling the “Old Republican idyll” or the “myth of the garden.” The countryside was becoming steadily infected by the encroachment of industrialization. Indeed, in Lesy’s text a sketch of a locomotive spanning two pages dislocates the center of the book. The effect seems similar to that which Hawthorne experienced in the east in 1844; “Until he hears the train’s whistle Hawthorne enjoys serenity close to euphoria. The lay of the land represents a singular insulation from disturbance, and so enhances the feeling of security and repose. The hollow is a virtual cocoon of freedom from anxiety, guilt, and conflict – a shrine of the pleasure principle” (Marx 28). On the other hand, Black River Falls, located in Central Wisconsin, also suffered as a beleaguered town as it became evident that the area was particularly lagging

behind the industrial development of the surrounding country. In the 1870s, wheat farming begins to move to larger tracts in the West which were more ably farmed with technological progress, resulting in falling wheat production shortly after 1870. In the 1880s, iron mining develops in the north of Wisconsin, and lumbering becomes the state's most important industry, followed by the paper and wood produce industries. The meatpacking and brewing industry arises in Milwaukee, and in the south, the dairy industry develops with the influx of skilled dairy farmers from New York and Scandinavia. The region of Black River Falls was left to scrutinize its marginally sufficient base position. Therefore, as civilization and technology developed, a sense of doom was presented through spasmodic, jagged, and elliptical texts, and the contradiction of the "machine in the garden" disclosed that the inherited and utopian symbol of order and beauty had been "divested of meaning" (Marx 276, 364).

Henry Hamilton Bennett's *Panorama From the Overhanging Cliff, Wisconsin Dells* (1891) is paralleled in the idyllic opening sequence of James Marsh's filmic adaptation of *Wisconsin Death Trip* released in 1999. The film also captures the eccentric character of the Wisconsin frontier and oscillates between scenes of "acceptance and denial" of national mythology (Lesy, *Wisconsin*). Another parallel can be found in the opening scene of David Lynch's cult television series *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991) whereby the seemingly tranquil aerial view of cascading falls and the river below precede the macabre incidents which take place in the remote logging town. The interest in these texts lies in the disjunction between a reputable narrative of sublime opportunity and a subversive narrative of



regression and disaster. In Michael Lesy's 1973 montage, the metanarrative of progress is supplanted with that of decay as he presents civilization's creep through darkness.

*Wisconsin Death Trip* is a collection of photographs, newspaper accounts, literary extracts, asylum records, advertisements, tall tales, vernacular history, montages and sociological, philosophical and historical commentary which denies the social and economic cohesion of the 1890s and subtly parallels the increasing social and political disorientation of the 1970s. Lesy juxtaposes extracts from Frank Cooper of the *Badger State Banner*, the Mendota State Asylum Record Book, the literature of Hamlin Garland, Glenway Wescott and Edgar Lee Masters, the mythical voice of the provincial historian and the town gossip, and the photography of the local monied and eccentric Charles Van Shaik. *Wisconsin Death Trip* is an aesthetics or poetics of history rather than a documentary manual. The text's moribund nature is established by so-called grisly vignettes which transgress our contemporary perception of decency. Accounts of parricide, suicide, abortion, lesbianism, religious mania, and arson perforate the text, along with racism, gross speculation, poverty and disease. We are presented with three chapters which exhibit a trinity of despair which reveals the desecration of the American Dream.

The text, however, does not scream sensationalism. Rather it seems stilted with often bland and sparse prose, and its components appear arbitrary and contrived. We perceive a host of unidentified figures who "stare uncomprehendingly" from the pages, offering neither exposition nor disavowal

(Taylor 346). The text seems labyrinthine in scope, aided by unpagination and the lack of titles, labels, and quotes accompanying each photograph, as Lesy provides a succession of facts which deny linear explication and generate disorientation rather than resolution. This arcane structure parallels the thematics of hysteria and disintegration as it reads as “a rotting network of decayed nerve endings” (Lesy, *Wisconsin*).

Lesy seeks to rationalize his endeavor in ornate prose by providing a summary of the neurasthenic condition - a response to rapid technological advancement, the modernization of industrial practices and hereditary decline; however, it seems to lack an economic, social and political historical groundwork which may serve as a key to the bizarre subject matter. James Marsh parallels Lesy’s vision elucidates in an interview with cultural critic Greil Marcus, “That was the first choice I made, not to try and explain the social-political-cultural history of anything. The stories are based on a respect for these individual tragedies and disasters. If the film lacks one thing, it’s a governing [explanatory] idea on that level – but it would have been a travesty.” The force of Lesy’s book seems to lie with his thesis of degeneration as he attests to the poisoning of civilized peoples, according to the 1895 philosophy of writer and physician Max Nordau. Nordau summarizes:

A race which is regularly addicted, even without excess, to narcotics and stimulants in any form (such as fermented alcoholic drinks, tobacco, opium, hashish, arsenic), which partakes of tainted foods (bread made with bad corn), which absorbs organic poisons (marsh fever, syphilis, tuberculosis, goiter), begets degenerate descendents who, if they remain exposed to the same influences, rapidly descend to the lowest degrees of degeneracy, to idiocy, to dwarfishness, etc. (34)

Accordingly, as sociologists such as Robert Dugdale and Frank Blackmar did at the turn of the century, Lesy presents a litany which evokes an entreaty for the revivification of the principles of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Lesy's text has been affirmed as resoundingly redundant in the sparse scholarship which has dealt with it. Deemed morbid treachery to the robust historical narrative and the plight of the democratic individual, *Wisconsin Death Trip* has been negated as little more than a cultural studies farce. Upon its publication, both the *Journal of American History* and the *American Historical Review* deigned the book undeserving of an appraisal. Likewise, James Marsh's 1999 filmic vision of the text was also rejected by European companies on the grounds that the project was "morbid, distasteful and obsessed with the wrong aspects of human life," and the submission received no response from the PBS series entitled "The American Experience" (Marcus). Critics found the book to be of dubious value in terms of method, conclusion and content, and it has remained "on the fringe of serious scholarship" since its publication (McArthur 411). In 1987, critic Liz Harris declared that, "At best, *Wisconsin Death Trip* provided tiny peepholes into the past, which the curious but not too squeamish could gaze through and ponder. At worst, it reduced rich lives to psychobabble and robbed death of its most potent and meaningful contexts: intimacy and personal history" (qtd. in Ruby 10). The critical espousal of profligacy and disdain continued in Susan Sontag's critical work *On Photography* (1977), whereby she claimed that the book is "rousing, fashionably pessimistic polemic, and totally whimsical as history" (73). The book appeared suitable merely for a

voyeuristic immersal in death and misfortune. Indeed, Lesy's pathological portrait of the 'small town' provoked resident Dave Wood to publish a booklength rebuttal, now out of print, entitled *Wisconsin Life Trip: A Love Affair With Rural Life* (1976).

Reductionist critique has also initiated the text into a discourse of horror; however, the relationship made is merely one of content and aesthetics rather than ideological agenda. Christopher Sharrett, who has written in detail about violence and apocalyptic theory, made an unfortunately fleeting and decontextualized comment that, "The portraits of dead babies, constricted, raw-boned farmers, and sundry small-town oddities is a metahistory that works as a cultural supplement to films like *Psycho*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, the films of David Lynch" (Sharrett). Comparisons have also been made with Stephen King, Tim Burton's *Sleepy Hollow* (1999), and photographer Diane Arbus' freak show portraits of uncanny children, transvestites, dwarves, giants and prostitutes. Marsh's documentary underscores this vein by referencing Wisconsin's notorious serial killer Ed Gein (the model for Norman Bates and the Texas cannibals) and Jeffrey Dahmer, and by bathing contemporary high school students in a red wash of light, comparing them to their eccentric ancestors while implicating them in a scene from *Carrie* (1976). Framed in this fashion, the alienatory and schlock value of the text is enhanced while the critical lens is distorted or denied.

What should be gleaned from *Wisconsin Death Trip*, according to Lesy's framework, is the harsh and stoic blade of puritanical rubric which slices through the discourse of horror. The text is filled with the alienated "creatures who had

been separated and divided by a selfish culture of secular Calvinism” (Lesy, *Wisconsin*). Indeed, Herman Melville noted the Calvinistic strain which has informed America’s most haunting discourse, stating that the “power of blackness” derived its force from “its appeals to that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin, from whose visitations, in some shape or other, no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly free” (qtd. in Levin 26). Lesy’s intent, therefore, is not necessarily to shock, but to discern why we are alarmed by an outbreak of greed, disease and failure and to interrogate the cultural assumptions which determine our reactions. Lesy’s puritanical lens may be interrogated, however, as it is questionable whether the large immigrant community of Germans and Norwegians in Central Wisconsin were imbued with the Puritan code of hard work and guilt. In *Voices in the Valley* (1964), cultural historian Frank Kramer presents the disjunction between an immigrant “folk heritage of land and lore” (63) and the “logical” soul of the Yankee (103). He explains this divergence stating:

the glitter of Yankee stars seemed frosty and remote to the great mass of immigrants pouring into the Middle West after 1848. The conflict between the social myth of these peoples and the rational myth of the New Englanders ... was joined in the Middle West wherever traditional human know-how and intuitive relationships challenged the claims of a rationally articulated way of life. (104)

The immigrant folk community was cloaked in “magic word and ritual drama” and negotiated with a “supernatural Presence,” making “primitive “science” a psychology” (183). According to Kramer, “Like a psychological pharmacy, the minds of the people of the valley were filled with vials of folk formulae,” and as

folk tales and rumor often included a strong element of the supernatural, folk belief could be a source of the 'dark' excerpts in Lesy's text.

Critics have tended to perceive *Wisconsin Death Trip* as a concatenation of primary sources and, as such, have objectified Lesy's project, highlighting its failure as a key to "causal or systematic knowledge" (Susman). They see the text as ineffable and ultimately obfuscating without locating it within the conventions of genre, literary modes, or ideological agendas. Importantly, 1973 witnessed the publication of seminal texts in anthropology, revisionist history and postmodernism, the most notable being Clifford Geertz's *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration Through Violence*, Hayden White's *Metahistory* and Daniel Bell's *The Coming of Postindustrial Society*.<sup>2</sup> Geertz proposed that the ethnographer's role is to observe, record and analyze a culture, interpreting signs in order to comprehend their meaning. Feasibly informing Lesy's mode, Geertz proposed that interpretation must be based on the "thick description" of a sign in order to glean the numerous implications and that large conclusions may be drawn from small and densely textured facts. Slotkin published a dark interpretation of American colonization, reinvisioning history through the lens of genocide, white supremacy and environmental exploitation, thus undermining the mythic representation of western expansion. Like Lesy, Slotkin revises the optimistic and progressive development of the frontier. White's *Metahistory* aimed to delineate pointed historical techniques and to discern ideological implications, tropes and methods of emplotment, and to stress the poetic and aesthetic value of history, just as Lesy was experimenting with

technique and aesthetics in his historical work. According to White's categorized affinities between the prefiguration of the historical field and the explanatory strategies used by a historian in a given work, Lesy seems to demonstrate a radical ideology, a mechanistic argument which focuses upon location, act and agency, utilizes the reductionist trope of metonymy, exploits tragedy as a source of emplotment, and reflects the work of Alexis de Tocqueville and Karl Marx. Lesy's work therefore emerged during an important period of scholarly production, suggesting that his work has similar force. As Warren Susman states in his introduction to the 2000 edition of the text, Lesy has provided us with "a consciousness of a territory still unexplored," and it is this refrain which will be addressed in the following pages. *Wisconsin Death Trip* will be contextualized according to history and genre in order to glean a fuller understanding of the attributes of the text.

Lesy proposes that "Neither the pictures nor the events were, when they were made or experienced, considered to be unique, extraordinary, or sensational" (*Wisconsin*). Historical and sociological sources prove Lesy's logic and also redeem the text in terms of historical credibility. Information on posthumous mourning practices, health in rural Wisconsin, and the 1893 depression reinforce Lesy's statement.<sup>3</sup> Posthumous mourning paintings were both "publicly acknowledged and socially acceptable" and were rife in the northeastern United States circa 1830-1860. The painters fashioned an illusion of "life in death" while postmortem photographs attempted the illusion of "the last sleep." According to Ruby, during the first forty years of photography, approximately 1840-1880,

professional photographers regularly advertised that they would take “likenesses of deceased persons” (52). From 1880 to 1910, images usually contained the entire body, typically in a casket, thus nullifying the illusion of life. Ruby suggests that the advent of casket and funeral photographs was a reflection of three alterations in the funeral customs of America: embalming, the replacement of the coffin with the casket, and the increasing popularity of funeral flowers (75). The mourning practice impacted material culture as ‘widow’s weeds’ or funeral and mourning clothes, memorial jewelry containing photographs and braided hair, and embroidered mourning pictures were common. From the 1890s to the 1920s, the cabinet memorial card was common in the northeastern and Midwestern United States, and at the turn of the century the concept of photographing funeral flowers and skeleton leaf arrangements was “sufficiently common and of interest to the stereograph buying public to warrant the publication of commercial floral arrangements” (Ruby 137). There is, therefore, tantamount evidence of a strong ‘death industry’ in the nineteenth century United States. This funereal culture bolster’s Lesy’s inclusion of town gossip which reads:

They’d put the funeral pictures right alongside the rest in the family album. ... When company came, they’d sit down and open the album. It was the polite thing. They’d turn the album pages and every once in a while the company would say something about how long Arthur’s hair had been when he was little, ... or how sweet the baby looked, and which one was it, since they knew you’d lost little Robert, and Lawrence, and Ida. (*Wiscónsin*)

Moreover, historian Geoffrey Gorer explains that:

During most of [the nineteenth century] death was no mystery, except in the sense that death is always a mystery. Children were encouraged to think about death, their own deaths and the edifying or cautionary deathbeds of others. It can have been a rare individual who, in the nineteenth century with its high mortality, had not witnessed at least one actual dying, as well as paying their respect to “beautiful corpses”; funerals



were the occasion of the greatest display for working class, middle class and aristocrat. (Ruby 60)

Lesy's seemingly abrasive portrayal of corpses and commemorative artifacts thus illuminates normative cultural practices of the nineteenth century.

The history of public health and sanitation also elucidates Lesy's text. During the 1880s Central Wisconsin experienced a rapid population growth. From 1870 to 1880 the population doubled, augmenting sanitation problems (Coombs 289). Without effective regulations to control the disposal of waste materials, protect water supplies, or enforce quarantine, infectious disease was ubiquitous. As historian Jan Coombs explains:

During the years following its own organization in 1875, the Wisconsin State Board of Health had encouraged local governments to establish boards of health and appoint health officers; however, few rural municipalities or towns had heeded their advice. When such boards and officers did exist in Central Wisconsin, many residents – especially immigrants from the German Empire where public health enforcement was a local police function – ignored or openly resisted measures to control their living habits. (286)

In 1887, Dr. W. H. Budge from Marshfield declared to the state board, "The worst obstacle encountered is the difficulty of making people obey orders, especially with regard to keeping children from infected houses away from others" (Coombs 296). Indeed, families, schools and churches were chastised for disregarding quarantine measures. Budge continued, "[T]he residents here are largely foreign born, and have queer ideas of personal liberty; many among them moreover are grossly ignorant" (Coombs 296). The early acknowledgement of sanitation measures is noted in *Wisconsin Death Trip* as one record states, "Dr. H. B. Cole, health officer ... recommended that our citizens be required to use unusual care in the disposition of garbage and slops, that all pig stys in the thickly settled portion

of the city be declared nuisances, and that none be allowed except they maintain a floor and it be cleaned twice a week during the summer.” Based on information derived from the 1880 census population and mortality statistics, evidence also reveals that citizens accepted folk beliefs about disease. For example, stillbirths were attributed to overwork or fright, physicians still ascribed “miasm,” or filth theories of infection, female illness was attributed to “uterine colic” or “womb sickness,” and authorities asserted that insanity and tuberculosis were the result of heredity, or an overindulgence in sex, alcohol, or tobacco (Coombs 287-288, 297).

Census reports also reveal that “gilded ladies,” or prostitutes, formed a significant part of the Central Wisconsin population, and, analogous to the frontier of the “Wild West,”<sup>4</sup> alcoholism was implicated in many deaths:

When a “party of Norwegians attended a dance in Rudolph,” in Wood County, “four of the party pitched into the fifth man and pounded the fellow nearly to death because they all “got woefully drunk.” ... [The] same paper recounted a game of draw poker. At one of the gambling dens in Centralia,” where Richard Johnson shot Frank Brown “in a dispute over stakes, the ball going through the latter’s hat just above the band.” (Coombs 300).

Accidental death was rife due to easy access to guns and axes, fires from faulty chimneys and lighting funnels, and dangerous equipment and working conditions caused logging accidents to be chronicled in almost every issue of Central Wisconsin’s weekly newspapers during the early 1880s (Coombs 298). Injuries from threshing machines and other farm machinery, and the railroad were also common. Devoid of regulatory measures, life on the semifrontier was perceptibly dangerous.

Coombs contends that at the time of the 1880 census, Central Wisconsin residents had “virtually no public health protection” (311). Primary source statistics derived from census data and research in medical and economic history prove that rural mortality rates were perpetually high during the latter decades of the nineteenth century. Published reports demonstrate that rural mortality rates remained constant while urban death rates drastically declined. On the one hand, historians attribute this to progressive public health reforms in the city, while on the other, improvements in vital statistics methods may have produced the uniform death rate (Coombs 311). Nonetheless, Lesy’s text proves the historical record that infectious disease was critical and that the perceptibly gradual development of regulatory health and safety mechanisms, public health reform and scientific knowledge led to a high death rate in Central Wisconsin.

The 1890s were a tumultuous decade as historian Ranjit Dighe makes evident.

He describes the 1890s as “a decade of drama and ferment” which included:

the much-noted “closing of the frontier”; the final military aggression against American Indians at Wounded Knee; a great wave of immigration, marked by the opening of Ellis Island in 1892; America’s entry into the quest for overseas empire, culminating in the Spanish-American War of 1898 and the occupation of the Philippines; the 1893-7 depression, at the time the most severe economic contraction in American history; violent showdowns between capital and labor in the Pullman and Homestead strikes; [and] the continued rise of big business.  
(32)

Indeed, incidents of racism, economic strife, drafting of young males, and nostalgic Indian portraits punctuate *Wisconsin Death Trip*. An important historical conjuncture to be considered in relation to the book is the economic crisis entitled the Panic of 1893. Evidence of economic woes are evident in the book as Lesy includes excerpts detailing “the crash of financial affairs ... of

substantial and financially responsible houses” and records from the Mendota State Asylum for the Insane such as one dating from 1894 which reads, “Norwegian. Age 27. Single. Farmer. Poor. ... Deranged on the subject of finances.” The economic blight is often masked by the ostentatious Columbian Exposition, also known as the Chicago World’s Fair, which promulgated luxury and the leisure class. Indeed, in the history of the Old Northwest, a pattern emerged whereby, “local divergence [was] viewed as anomalous and transitory in the national narrative. After each disruption, the “heartland” image was reestablished and local problems were swept under the rug of nationalism, as they were at the Chicago Fair” (Watts 219). In the final days of Benjamin Harrison’s administration in 1892, the Reading Railroad, a major eastern line, went into receivership. The 1892 collapse was magnified as other banks and businesses, dependent upon the railroad, went into recession. Concomitantly, the stock market plunged dramatically, and European investors, also in recession, withdrew. The enduring agricultural depression caused by storm, drought and overproduction deepened. As historian David Whitten explains:

Midwestern and Southern farming regions seethed with discontent as growers watched staple prices fall by as much as two-thirds after 1870 and all farm prices by two-fifths; meanwhile, the general wholesale index fell by one-fourth. The situation was grave for many. Farmers’ terms of trade had worsened, and dollar debts willingly incurred in good times to permit agricultural expansion were becoming unbearable burdens. Debt payments and low prices restricted agrarian purchasing power and demand for goods and services. Significantly, both output and consumption of farm equipment began to fall as early as 1891, marking a decline in agricultural investment. (Par. 13)

The gold standard plunged in the early days of Cleveland’s government. The lavish spending of the ‘Billion Dollar Congress’ and the gold drain caused by the

Sherman Silver Purchase Act were responsible for the surplus reduction. The depression was also attributed to underconsumption and deflation dating back to the Civil War. Farmer activists, demanding that the government stamp more silver, became involved in "Prairie Populism" generating a third-party political movement which assembled under the banner of the People's or Populist Party in 1892. In a speech given at the 1896 Democratic Convention in Chicago, William Jennings Bryan denounced the gold standard declaring, "You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns, you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold" (qtd. in Dighe 139). The discontent of the working-class "tillers and toilers" was strikingly evident, and the dire economic situation did not abate until mid-1897.

Interestingly, however, the Mid West did become a source of significant source of social and political ideas and leadership at the turn of the century, and Wisconsin became a model state of the "Heartland." This may be attributed, in some cases, to strong Midwestern leadership during the economic crisis. Examples of this supportive Midwestern leadership include Jacob S. Coxey, who led Coxey's Army, a band of unemployed men, from Masillon, Ohio, to Washington, D.C. in 1894 to demand that Congress print greenbacks in order to finance public works projects, James B. Weaver, who helped form the Farmers' Alliance and was the Populist Party candidate in 1892, William Jennings Bryan, from Salem, Illinois, who gave the infamous "Cross of Gold" speech, Robert M. LaFollette who promoted the "Wisconsin Idea" of progressive reform, and

socialist Eugene Debbs. This attests to Lesy's declaration of a schizophrenic era which harbors both images of affirmation and denial.

A final important historical context to consider in relation to *Wisconsin Death Trip* is the "Farm Crisis" of the 1970s and 1980s. Echoing the Panic of 1893, the economic crisis resulted in rural distress, murder and suicide, including the deadly ambush of two Minnesota bankers, the gunning down of a banker, farmwife and farmer in Iowa, and the murder of two U.S. Marshals in North Dakota (Dudley 14). As historian and sociologist Kathryn Marie Dudley explains in *Debt and Dispossession* (2000), "Economic failure is a stigma in virtually all walks of life, but it is especially discrediting in rural townships, where viable farms remain in the family for generations. A pioneering spirit runs deep in the hearts of those who till the land, and these settlers of the prairie have never looked kindly upon those who succumb to adversity" (5). Most poignantly, in relation to Lesy's text, she states, "Poking up through the public story are feelings of anger and ambivalence, humiliation and betrayal – and a haunting sense that something has gone seriously wrong in America" (47). Dudley lists the "seeds of the farm crisis," sown during the 1970s as optimism about the future of agriculture, whereby the Nixon administration encouraged farmers to plant "fencerow to fencerow" due to factors including "floating" currency, poor weather in other parts of the globe, and a Soviet Union contract for wheat and feed grain in 1972 (12, 23). Due to this trade agreement with the USSR, between the summers of 1972 and 1973, the price of wheat rose from \$1.61 to more than \$5.00 per bushel (Nordin & Scott 191). The agricultural boom of the 1970s depended upon

worldwide demand for U.S. farm products and low-cost credit, resulting in high inflation (Dudley 33). In 1980 President Jimmy Carter pronounced a grain embargo on the USSR in response to the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan. During the mid-1980s, international commodity markets slumped and interest rates "soared into double digits" (Dudley 13). Farmers were forced to default on their loans and "more agricultural banks failed in 1987 than in any year since the Great Depression" (Dudley 13). This agricultural depression parallels that economic panic in *Wisconsin Death Trip*, including the concomitant psychological trauma, providing a more accessible lens for the text. All these historical factors suggest a relationship of causality between the events in the book and the social, economic and political climate of the United States in the 1890s, and begin to explicate Lesy's purportedly intangible text.

This project will gain further support from an investigation of mode and genre as it is evident that Lesy's alchemical historical mirror reflects not only the literary movements of fin de siècle nineteenth century culture, but also his contemporaneous postindustrial era. I will locate Lesy's so-called "genre-defying" text within the discourse of naturalism and postmodernism in order to ground the text in paradigmatic literary theory.

*Wisconsin Death Trip* is a striking example of the naturalistic philosophy of pessimistic materialistic determinism, and realism and naturalism's explicit engagement with historical transformation such as the rise of science and scientific theory, industrialism and a growing consumer culture, and the changing roles of men and women at the turn of the century. The populace of Lesy's text,

like the characters of naturalistic fiction, stoop to Max Nordau's fin de siècle assertion that, "The whole people fell into the condition of a man suddenly visited by a crushing blow of destiny, in his fortune, his position, his family, his reputation, even in his self-respect" (42). Lesy's subjects suffer from "the condition of [their] capture at birth" displaying the lack of agency and autonomy of the disposition of naturalism.<sup>5</sup> Lesy's death trip, yoked with a host of discontents who desire to discover "magical devices that could overcome and perhaps even eliminate fate" seems more at home with the brutal reality of Theodore Dreiser, in the arms of Silas Weir Mitchell, or in the teeth of *McTeague* (Lesy, *Wisconsin*). The excerpts in Lesy's text parallel the thematics of economic strife and avarice found in the naturalist novel. A salient example would be the photograph of a teak table laden with gold coins, and an excerpt which reads, "Mania for speculation unbalanced [Judge S. C. Simonds'] mind years ago which led him to squander his earnings in bucket shops and other forms of chance" (*Wisconsin*). These seem emblematic of Frank Norris' novels of greed including *McTeague* (1899), *The Octopus* (1901) and *The Pit* (1903).

Lesy's book functions in the "discourse of obsessionality" which is the hallmark of the naturalistic text (Fleissner 45).<sup>6</sup> This relates directly to Lesy's assertion that the book emulates the social philosophy or cultural disease of neurasthenia or, as George Beard described in 1881: American nervousness. Literary critic Jennifer Fleissner explains that, "A version of obsession-compulsion emerged ... specifically out of a prior diagnosis, neurasthenia, that linked the stuckness of literal historical individuals in detail and hyperbolic



ordering to a potential stagnation of history” (51). Indeed, Nordau criticized literature in the age of neurasthenia as “an “inane reverie,” “a boundless, aimless, and shoreless stream of fugitive ideas” linked at most by “capricious” and “purely mechanical” forms of association” (qtd. in Fleissner 56). This offers a clue to Lesy’s stylistic oeuvre and to the critical backlash to his work. *Wisconsin Death Trip* evokes the ‘compulsion to describe’ (along with the compulsion to horde, burn, purify and revere), or the situational and descriptive characteristics of the naturalist author which are said to parallel the characters’ lack of agency within their work.

Lesy proclaims that his book is filled with words, “not so casual as descriptive” that fill the space of the book with a “constantly repeated theme” (Lesy, *Wisconsin*). The concept of traumatic repetition may be directly related to the discourse of naturalism as it has been described as a “repeated semantic choice ... - as fixed like a game of chance, if not fixated, like a neurotic” (Sedgwick n.23 175). The fixity of exhaustive description has come under fire by literary critics who propose the impotence of a model which does little more than aestheticize the historical. According to Jean-Christophe Agnew, not only does this mode threaten the classic linear movement of historical narrative but it opens “vistas of interpretation that are almost vertiginous in their potential complexity” (qtd. in Fleissner 46). Although Warren Susman defends Lesy in his introduction to *Wisconsin Death Trip*, quoting French thinker and literary historian Hippolyte Taine:

[E]very action which we see involves an infinite association of reasonings, emotions, sensations new and old, which have served to bring [a new world] to light, and which, like great rocks deep-seated in

the ground, find in it their end and their level. This underworld is a new subject-matter, proper to the historian.

However, Lesy does provides us with paper trails whereby we attempt to glean connections and patterns in his work through an analysis of juxtaposition and repetition, but are ultimately frustrated. Alan Liu, an opponent of new historicism, purports that “The picture of great detail ... threatens to become a *great picture* of detail,” whereby the reader is positioned as an “entranced” spectator, who “views the perfect form of cultural agony as if from across the proscenium” (qtd. in Fleissner 47). We are left without definitions and explanation, often wondering what each detail *means* in terms of culture, individual psychology and societal ramifications. Susman makes this overt in his introduction as he questions, “What does the horror of fire – what appears to be an obsessive horror – mean?” Philippe Hamon contends that, “the more [the naturalist text] becomes saturated with descriptions ... the more it becomes organized and repetitious, thus becoming increasingly a closed system ... [that] constantly evokes itself” (Fleissner 47). The intricately repetitive design of *Wisconsin Death Trip* may explain why the book has been perceived as a self-referential text which does not accord with ideological and generic paradigms. This explains the charges of “mute cacophony” made against Lesy’s work.

Naturalism was also chastised as a deviant discourse for its desire to achieve “so-called ‘comprehension’ of every bestiality” (Fleissner 57). Lesy does include such bestialities as rape, assault, and arson, attesting to the brute nature of man. Hamlin Garland, whose “camera-like writing” is included as a ‘vein’ in Lesy’s

body of work, expresses his dismay at the predominance of sexual vice and crime in pioneering naturalist novels:

For the most part, the men and women I had known in my youth were normal, hardworking and decent in work and action. Their lives were hard, unlovely, sometimes drab and bitter but they were not sexual perverts. As a veritist I argued that one could be as real and true in presenting the average man and woman as in describing cases of incest, adultery and murder. I found as Whitman told me he had found in the life of the average American a certain decorum and normality. (Reuben)

Lesy's text does in fact demonstrate the morbid pessimism of late nineteenth century culture whereby authors such as Edgar Saltus argued for the validity of a "new pessimism" in literature, aesthetics and philosophy, exemplified by authors such as Arthur Schopenhauer, who declared the fundamental irrationality of the universe, and Edward Von Hartmann. In *The Philosophy of Disenchantment* published in 1885, the year that Lesy's text originates, Saltus decreed that, "The world is a theater of misery in which, were the choice accorded it ... it would be preferable not to be born at all" (Lutz 105). Saltus was a stylistic entrepreneur who reveled in the dark side of history. He raised desperation to the level of a "first principle" and declared that literature and philosophy represented affliction "anatomized" (Lutz 105). The events in *Wisconsin Death Trip* thus represent the prevailing climate of tragedy, disavowal and debasement which was evident in the late nineteenth century. Lesy therefore displays the thematics of a pessimistic culture and the stylistic mechanism of the degenerate. This may be summarized in the words of Nordau, who described the literature and culture of degeneration:

Everything in these houses aims at exciting the nerves and dazzling the senses. The disconnected and antithetical effects in all arrangements, the constant contradiction between form and purpose, the outlandishness of most objects, is intended to be bewildering. ... All is discrepant,

indiscriminate jumble. The unity of abiding by one definite historical style counts as old-fashioned, provincial, Philistine, and the time has not yet produced a style of its own. (11)

This notion of disjuncture is also suited to the climate of the 1970s and the postindustrial age. As historian J. David Hoeveler, Jr. explains, during this age things took on “greater abstraction, amorphousness, intangibility. The sense of solidness, permanence, and wholeness [yielded] to fissures, disintegration, intangibility” (6). The postindustrial period displayed the ethereality of social ties and the emergence of a therapeutic culture, whereby according to 1970s social critic Christopher Lasch, the population hungered for “the feeling, the momentary illusion, of personal well-being, health, and psychic security” (Hoeveler 12). This era represented a moment of temporal estrangement infused by nebulous historical tenses which denied insight and edification. Photography became the sign of serial consumption and the image the signifier of hyperreal panache. The 1970s was the period in which postmodernism emerged, with its distinct features of historical nostalgia, psychic fragmentation and the ascendancy of the image resulting in the “random cannibalization” and vogue of styles of the past (Jameson 18). With its concoction of verbal and visual documentary, intermittent arcane literary extracts and seemingly confabulatory excerpts, Lesy’s work exemplifies a polyphony that corresponds to postmodernism’s heterogeneity.

The scholarly ostracism of Lesy’s “coffee-table” text may thus gain weight from the condemnation of postmodern tactics as well as a contemporary critique of New Historicism. New Historicism marks the decline of the grand narrative of history, which Jean-Francois Lyotard and others have referred to as a referent of the postmodern condition. Its interdisciplinary approach, which privileges image

and narrative as accomplishing cultural work and contextualizes both author and narrative product, has been referred to as the “fantastic interdisciplinary nothingness of metaphor” (Budge 118). New Historicist discourse is purportedly a historical symptom characterized by “ephemerality” due to the fact that “historical fragments are incorporated ... in such a way as to frustrate any tendency to symbolic resonance” (Budge 132). Postmodernism has been similarly repudiated as “the coexisting wreckage of all cultures, universally available but equally emptied of meaning; traversed and exploited by the cruise ships of bloated consumers of the image” (Smith 6). In such a critical climate, it would not be surprising for Lesy’s text to be considered part of the “anarchic stampcollecting of unrelated moments” that purportedly characterizes the postmodern era (Davis 201). I would argue that Lesy’s text does not speak to unrelated moments but bridges moments of historical homogeneity discovered through scholarly excavation.

Lesy’s text plays into the fashion for the archive that emerged in the 1970s and its indisputable hunt for images of the past. The vogue of the storeroom and the dusty spectacle is evident in *Wisconsin Death Trip*, as it is based on artifacts by which, “Twenty years of the common but multivariate life of a county seat, now transformed into images composed of elementary chemical ciphers, sat enclosed by the space of one dry and dusty four-walled and ceilinged room” (Lesy, *Wisconsin*). Lesy’s repetitious visual refrains, including collages which duplicate hands, faces and bodies, and the reiteration of figures and scenes, transform the subject into a museological prosthetic object, composing “extraordinary montages

which belong more to a combinatory process ... with large photo, kino or historio-synthetic machines ... that ... leave us somehow totally indifferent” due to their reproducibility (Baudrillard 195). As Paul Grainge explains, contemporary critics understand contemporary memory practices in terms of depthlessness (Fredric Jameson), struggle (Andreas Huyssen), and inauthenticity (Pierre Nora). One must thus be (a)ware of charges of superficiality, high-tech amnesia, or deceptions and biases which distort social and cultural practices and compositions. According to Grainge, the nostalgic mode is “embroiled in these different schemes of beleaguered mnemonic experience” and memorial culture has been implicated as a “regressive malady, the commodified result of a rapacious heritage industry” (Grainge 85, 3).

Fredric Jameson elucidates in *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) that the “remarkable current intensification of an addiction to the photographic image is itself a tangible symptom of an omnipresent, omnivorous, and well-nigh libidinal historicism” (18). Lesy’s reification of a number of Charley Van Shaick’s 3,000 preserved images demonstrates Jameson’s assertion that “the resurrection of the dead of anonymous and silenced generations, the retrospective dimension indispensable to any vital reorientation of our collective future – has meanwhile itself become a vast collection of images, a multitudinous photographic simulacrum” (18). Indeed, the images chosen by Lesy are repeated and reappropriated in such a manner that they seem to represent, as Jean Baudrillard outlined in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), a copy without an original or a model. The picture of a dead baby in a coffin is

repeated twice in the book in its original context. The opening of Marsh's *Wisconsin Death Trip* then depicts the photographer capturing a picture of a dead child. A close up shot of a dead child in a coffin is then displayed as an enlarged portrait one woman carries under her arm as she walks down the street. A picture of a dead girl in a coffin is also used to market the film on the official website. The proliferation of this image thus decontextualizes and depersonalizes the death of the children and desensitizes us to the sight of a corpse.

Postmodern critique deprecates stylistic renderings of the past displayed through the frame of the glossy image. As Baudrillard decries in "The Evil Demon of Images and the Procession of Simulacra":

[I]f [images] fascinate us so much it is not because they are sites of the production of meaning and representation ... it is on the contrary because they are sites of the *disappearance* of meaning and representation, sites in which we are caught quite apart from any judgment of reality, thus sites of a fatal strategy of degeneration of the real and of the reality principle. (194)

In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes discusses the concept of the photograph as purveyor of funereal immobility which, as a dead object, evinces the disappearance of meaning. He states that the figure in a photograph "[does] not *emerge*, [does] not *leave*," it is "anesthetized and fastened down, like butterflies" (57). He states that "Photography is a kind of primitive theater, a ... *Tableau Vivant*, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead," thus demonstrating the "degeneration of the real" (32). Georg Lukacs also disparages the stultifying nature of obsessive, imagistic, descriptive discourse which relates to this theory of photography. He claims that the individuals depicted are devolved into "mere objects arranged within this portrait of the social

world as “still lives” (qtd. in Fleissner 40). Most importantly, he feared that “description would transform living persons into “inanimate objects,” mere bodies meant to stand as labeled exhibits (often of particular pathologies) for the text’s clinical gaze” (qtd. in Fleissner 47). According to these critics, therefore, the photograph may be praised for its hallucinogenic qualities as merely an uncanny apparition of the past which does not accord concrete knowledge.

The taciturn nature of photographs has also been pronounced by Susan Sontag who claimed that “to photograph someone is a sublimated murder – a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time” and that “Photography also converts the whole world into a cemetery” (*On Photography* 14, “Introduction”). The inclusion of the words “Death Trip” in Lesy’s title may thus suggest a visual memory practice, or the action of shooting and viewing pictures. In July, 1846 after Walt Whitman visited “Plumbe’s Daguerreotype Establishment” on lower Broadway, New York, he reported in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*:

Ah! What tales might those pictures tell if their mute lips had the power of speech! How romance then, would be infinitely outdone by fact ... [A] great legion of human faces [with all those] eyes gazing silently but fixedly upon you [suggests] an immense Phantom concourse – speechless and motionless, but yet [of] *realities*. You are indeed in a new world – a peopled world, though mute as the grave. (qtd. in Trachtenberg, *Reading* 25).

In this equation, according to Andre Bazin, “[The photograph] embalms time, rescuing it from its proper condition” (qtd. in Ruby). Therefore, the aura in the age of mechanical reproduction is apparently nothing more than, according to Douglas Crimp, a shadow of the past (179). Indeed, *Wisconsin Death Trip* does not represent the “sacred” photography of those such as Walker Evans who canonized the vernacular landscape of 1930’s America, including its noble



simplicity, folkloric charm, and emblematic portrayal of rural American virtues. The style of Lesy's visual images resonates more strongly with that of the "profane" period of the 1960s and 1970s which was dominated by the "New Topographics." These photographers perceived the modern American landscape as "a wasteland of banality and self-imposed isolation," and the photographs themselves were presented with a minimum amount of interpretation (Davis 192). The photographs were presented as an "objective transcription of social and physical facts" with prosaic inflection and "mind-numbing repetitiveness" (Davis 206-7). The blank landscapes of profane photography represent the "bankrupt dreams and existential despair" of 1970s America much as the monotone and ghostly faces suggested the spirit-deadening gloom and failure of Lesy's 1890s (Davis 208).

*Wisconsin Death Trip*, which speaks to the pessimism of the heuristic abstraction of neurasthenia and the accompanying pessimism of the 1890s, also reflects the current of "malaise" in the era in which it was produced. A sense of dislocation in the 1970s is attributed to the Arab oil embargo and America's withdrawal from Vietnam, the Watergate scandal and the tarnishing of the Presidency, and the confusions of sexual morality and family values that prompted Jimmy Carter to declare an American "crisis of confidence" in 1979. This would also continue into the 1980s with the rural "Farm Crisis." According to Grainge, the climate of the 1970s was one of "sociopolitical disorientation and creative enervation" (43). The disposition of the period is expressed in Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, first published in *Rolling Stone*

magazine in 1971. Thompson's 'gonzo journalism' described the "bad vibrations" of paranoia, madness, fear and loathing" and questions, "What is sane? Especially here in 'our own country' – in this doomstruck era of Nixon" (85, 178). Thompson describes "grim meathook realities" and "a generation of permanent cripples, failed seekers" (179). This corresponds to the logic of the 'post' society as, according to Jameson:

[W]hat categorizes the newer 'intensities' of the postmodern, which have also been characterized in terms of the 'bad trip' and schizophrenic submersion, can just as well be formulated in terms of the messiness of a dispersed existence, existential messiness, the perpetual distraction of post-sixties life. Indeed, one is tempted... to evoke the more general informing context of some larger virtual nightmare, which can be identified as the sixties gone toxic, a whole historical and countercultural 'bad trip' in which psychic fragmentation is raised to a qualitatively new power, the structural disintegrations of the decentered subject. (qtd. in Smith 13)

This concept of a delirious historical nightmare implies the hallucinogenic quality of *Wisconsin Death Trip*. Indeed, Lesy admits that this title was an epithet for a drug-induced hallucination of death and potential rebirth (*Forbidden* 14). Like Thompson's text of inebriation, this death trip can be read as an allegory of "that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back" (68). The notion of an historical 'bad trip' encapsulates what I believe to be Lesy's ideological vision. *Wisconsin Death Trip* could be considered as "realism with a vengeance," the label given to E. W. Howe's *The Story of a Country Town* by Hamlin Garland in 1886 (Watts 185). Lesy presents a narrative of rupture whereby the optimism and progress of Manifest Destiny has regressed to the point of stagnation and decline. In 1893 Wisconsinite Frederick Jackson Turner annunciated his "Frontier Thesis" to the meeting of the American Historical Association at the Columbian

Exposition. From his narrative of evolutionary advancement and virtuous Americanization, one perilous remark remains strikingly poignant; “[A]t the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man. He must accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish” (qtd. in Taylor 2). Lesy’s text complies with Turner’s articulation of frontier stages or waves, but, according to Turner’s thesis, the populace of *Wisconsin Death Trip* are merely in the phase of barbarity:

So long as free land exists, the opportunity for a competency exists ... [E]ach one of the periods of lax financial integrity coincides with periods when a new set of frontier communities had arisen ... The recent Populist agitation is a case in point. Many a State that now declines any connection with the tenets of the Populists, itself adhered to such ideas in an earlier stage of the development of the State. A primitive society can hardly be expected to show the intelligent appreciation of the complexity of business interests in a developed society. (qtd. in Taylor 15)

*Wisconsin Death Trip* does indeed describe a calamitous civilization. As Warren Susman suggests in his pointed preface, “Many historians have concerned themselves with American aspirations and hopes; few with its fears and nightmares. Lesy offers us a unique opportunity to face not the American Dream but the American Nightmare.” His text challenges “The rhetoric of the Everlasting Yea, the rhapsody of the eagle-screaming orator, and the note of self-praise [which has] clangorously predominated, affecting the mood of attempts to interpret [American] culture” (Levin 7). Lesy’s logic of disintegration undermines the grand narrative of progress in terms of content and style, becoming a ‘demonic history text’ that pervasively intimates the “dark thing” or fissure in the nation’s history (Lesy, *Wisconsin*).

*Wisconsin Death Trip* can be read as a Gothic text. The 1929 edition of Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary describes one meaning of the Gothic which

reads, “Of, pertaining to, or characteristic of, the Middle Ages; medieval; derogatory, of, pertaining to, or characteristic of the Dark Ages; hence: rude; barbarous.” In this manner, the Gothic has been perceived as a disreputable label, encouraging negative reactions to, for example, Grant Wood’s painting entitled *American Gothic* (1930). Teresa Goddu provides a pertinent definition of the American Gothic in *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation* (1997), stating:

American gothic literature criticizes America’s national myth of new-world innocence by voicing the cultural contradictions that undermine the nation’s claim to purity and equality. Showing how these contradictions contest and constitute national identity even as they are denied, the gothic tells of the historical horrors that make national identity possible yet must be repressed in order to sustain it.” (10)

American Gothic can be contrasted with that of European authors who focused on archaic settings, the supernatural and ghosts or goblins, or railed against the church and the state. American Gothic was decidedly adapted to capture the development of national identity, revealing the cultural and historical challenges presented by the new nation. The definition of gothic used in this essay will relate to both the notion of ‘cultural contradiction’ and that of mental or psychic frontiers. Lesy’s montage of toil, strife, anxiety, and untimely death interrogates America’s foundational mythology, thus disturbing the logocentric order of history. Borrowing from Eric Savoy’s theory of the American Gothic, “it is not simply the case that a horrific “alternative” history emerges as a cohesive or fully explanatory corrective that is superimposed upon nostalgic history. Rather, it interrupts by fits and starts in a semiotic that is fragmentary, one that is more suggestive than conclusive” (8). *Wisconsin Death Trip* does at times present an

ambivalent thesis, juxtaposing images of affirmation or acceptance, such as a strong and healthy masculine body, such as that associated with the West at the turn of the century, with a disconcerting discourse which challenges a hegemonic interpretation of history. These contradictions reveal the text's subversive potential.

My purpose is to read *Wisconsin Death Trip* as an example of Midwestern Gothic, a sub-genre which, as yet, has not received critical attention. While critics have theorized the Gothic nature of the eastern seaboard and the Southern United States, little scholarly attention has been paid to the Mid West. A theoretical intimation has been provided by David Mogen, Scott Sanders and Joanne Karpinski in their collection *Frontier Gothic: Terror and Wonder at the Frontier in American Literature*, as they state, "The dark, gothic underside of American frontier literature ironically symbolizes the desolation wrought by progress, the psychological deprivation of alienation, and the threatening but revolutionary possibilities that appear when civilized conventions are left behind" (19). Indeed, the Midwestern Gothic reads as a subversion of the pioneer narrative, oftentimes demonstrating the antithesis of progress and focusing on the grave aspects of psychic and familial history.

Lesy's book also displays Gothic attributes in terms of both style and content. The text will be read alongside Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject as the seamless narrative of progress is dismantled and "the place where meaning collapses" emerges. The text's architecture will also be read according to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's delineation of Gothic conventions. I will then locate Lesy's

text within a particular spatial model, outlining the attributes of a Midwestern Gothic alongside literary and visual texts from Middle America. These texts are also seemingly tangential and, for the most part, have received little scholarly attention. I will discuss Glenway Wescott's eulogy to family history entitled *The Grandmothers* (1927), Sherwood Anderson's obscene and unruly text entitled *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) and Pope Brock's *Indiana Gothic* (1999), a tale of adultery, insanity and murder. I will also examine Harmony Korine's repulsive portrait of Xenia, Ohio, a town ravaged by a tornado, poverty, and decadence, which is named after its degenerate protagonist *Gummo* (1997). Finally, I will explore Mark and Michael Polish's somber portrait of the death of a small town in the name of progress, entitled *Northfork* (2003). These examples parallel Lesy's text in terms of style and subject matter, and collectively they formulate a more comprehensive theory of Midwestern Gothic. Lesy's text will be elevated to the realm of serious scholarship as the nuances of the supposedly "mad hatter's tea party full of mock testimony and false witness" will be given new resonance. As Thomas Pynchon claims in *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), infused with historical and cultural references and the threat of obliteration, "This serpentine slag-heap ... is not a ruin at all. It is in perfect working order."

## Chapter 1: "... those filthy things you used to read": Abject History and Midwestern Gothic

In Leander's mind every moment left an indestructible remnant, as each dying coral plant in the sea leaves a bit of stone where it lived, pink with its blood which does not fade.

Glenway Wescott, *The Grandmothers*

Mrs. Jennie Jones of Oconto, charged with sending obscene matter through the mails, pleaded guilty in U.S. court recently and was sentenced to one year imprisonment.

[5/8, State]

*Wisconsin Death Trip*

Eric Savoy inaugurates his theory of the American Gothic with the chilling interjection of a photographic face. The picture is of a murderer of a farm family from the high wheat plains of western Kansas. Savoy explains the Gothic imperative of the photograph in the desire to locate a static face within the narrative, disrupting and suspending its trajectory. He expresses the perturbing nature of the photograph due to its ability to aid the imaginative reconstruction of a historical event and to provide "intuitive, visceral knowledge of terrible affect that approaches the experiential" (3-4). The palpable effect of a photograph stimulates memory and the recurrence of past events similar to the gothic facet of the return of the repressed, and also intimates a tendency of American gothic by which, as Leslie Fiedler has suggested, "the past, even dead, *especially* dead, could continue to work harm" (qtd. in Savoy 4). This 'return of the repressed' evokes *Wisconsin Death Trip's* "inhalations and ... exhalations [that] were crystallized in silver emulsion on 30,000 glass plate negatives" which resist a vanishing point as they are anticipated to "recede into futurity" (Savoy 4). The

haunting nature of these pictures will be augmented with time as each prospective viewer will occupy an enhanced position of distantiation.

Lesy's text, perceived as a "flexible mirror" attempts to focus the imagination in order to recreate the past and preempt the future, again suggesting historical continuity, although its predictions seem customarily dispiriting. Lesy's use of the term "mirror" echoes the unsettling temperament induced by early daguerreotype and portrait photography. The lifelike image reproduced by early photography had associations with necromancy and black magic. Alan Trachtenberg explains that the "suspicion of the apparitional image evokes a not uncommon moment in the early career of photography in America, a moment of shudder and refusal" (*Reading* 23). Lesy appears, therefore, like Roland Barthes, as a photographic realist. Barthes explains, "the realists do not take the photograph for a "copy" of reality, but for an emanation of *past reality*: a *magic*, not an art" (88). The "stilted look" of early portraits caused a fearful tremor amongst the technologically naïve population and still retains this effect today as we witness "that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead" (Barthes 9). The photograph or the portrait, which contained the unamiable face, seemed to threaten the soul of both subject and onlooker, a theme which was prevalent in 1830s and 1840s popular gothic fiction written by authors such as A. J. H. Duganne, and Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne. While the metaphor of the mirror was associated with divination and transgressive encounters with the dead or absent, it also stood simultaneously for truth and deception and connoted the gothic metaphysic of light and shade, surface and



depth, and silence and speech (Trachtenberg, "Photograph" 27, 37). The photograph was thus conceived as a device which alluded to inexplicable events and the undercurrent of social life.

The pictorial image has been purveyed as a source of what Nebraska photographer Wright Morris termed "mystic meaning" demanding imaginative constructive work, or a conjuration of historical and social import. Like the photographs of the Kansan killers referenced by Savoy, the visual image in the Mid West has been alluded to as staple rhetoric of a gothic formula. Morris, who juxtaposed visual and verbal dialogue in photo-texts such as *The Inhabitants* and *The Home Place*, noted his "yearning for blackness" in a 1977 interview (Rice 129). He demonstrated his romantic affinity to haunting ruins and the imagination, presented "artifacts, representing conditions, and ballads singing of heartbreak, death ... pleasurable longing. ... and that fine madness that gives to airy nothing a local habitation and a name" (qtd. in Rice 128-9). Morris's texts oscillate between a depiction of loss and gain, just as Lesy's text vacillates between "acceptance and denial." Morris resists the harmonious turn of nostalgia, as does Lesy, depicting, as he describes in *World in The Attic*, "home-town nausea" and projecting "disturbing internal states of mind" (Rice 139). Through his photographs, Morris' strain of Gothicism suggests dehumanization, isolation and the "empty spaces and remote vacancies of a tenuous past", providing "a thoughtful counter to the superfluity of deceptive clichés born of the prosperity of post-World War II American society" (Rice 139, 129). Grant Wood's Iowa portrait, entitled *American Gothic* (1930), also denotes "historical suffering"

(Savoy 17). Its “shadow of signification” which interrogates the national symbolic also intimates “delusional retrospection” and a “claustrophobia of spirit among the rolling fields” (Savoy 16-17). The faces represent a particular perspective of the American psyche such as that delineated by D. H. Lawrence who claimed that “the essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer. It has never yet melted” (qtd. in Slotkin).

Wood and Morris’ pictorial works strive to exhibit inhabitation and the “ghosts of return” in a region of isolation and estrangement, and Lesy’s text provides that prosopopoeia of Midwestern dismay which is alluded to by the former artworks. Eve Sedgwick stresses the centrality of the human face to the gothic text, commenting:

The human face seems to tyrannize over the Gothic novel, and its insistence ... is mostly closely related to what readers see as the flatness, the devitalization of characters in these novels. Faces tyrannize here neither by beauty nor by ugliness ... but by their very freight of meaning ... Flesh marked by furrows? – yes or no. Eyes fiery? (Fiery eyes go with furrowed flesh, for they are reservoirs of the fury born of mutilation.) Features in motion? – yes or no. Like the characters impressed on them, the faces themselves seem to be halfway toward becoming a language, a code, a limited system of differentials that could cast a broad net of reference and interrelation. Since faces in these novels are said to record history and every social relation, such a language could have a great deal to say. (158)

Lesy’s text is implicated in this hieroglyphic language as he hones in on particular faces, repeatedly emphasizing a striking countenance from a group portrait. On discovering the images which were later to be included in *Wisconsin Death Trip*, Lesy states that the faces registered “fear and astonishment” (*Forbidden* 12) which could represent the shock of temporal disorientation and an apocalyptic discourse which is characteristic of the American psyche. Commenting on the

baroque nature of allegory, Walter Benjamin states that, “Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face – or rather a death’s head” (qtd. in Seyhan 238). The suggestive image of a face thus haunts the psyche, intimating the reconstruction of a historical event and evoking the “visceral knowledge of terrible affect” (Savoy 4). Eric Savoy’s introductory lens of “The Face of the Tenant” thus provides ingress to *Wisconsin Death Trip*.

What is also noteworthy about Savoy’s essay, however, is the geographical structuring of his piece. He begins and ends his theory of gothic cultural production in the United States in Middle America. Commencing on the plains of Kansas and concluding in Iowa, Savoy seems to be delineating fertile ground for a regional study. While initially affirming that ““American gothic” does not exist apart from its specific regional manifestations,” he then states that “the burden of a scarifying past is more typical of New England and southern gothic than, for example, that of the prairies” (6). While gesturing toward a new temporal site of social and psychic gothic historiography, Savoy does not affirm the area as fruitful for further study. *Wisconsin Death Trip* suggests otherwise as Lesy claims that his “text and photographs might suggest certain abstract ideas not only about the town of Black River Falls, county of Jackson, state of Wisconsin, but about the entire region and era in which the town, county, and state were enmeshed” (*Wisconsin*). Savoy’s suggestive examples will here denote the starting point for a study of *Wisconsin Death Trip* in relation to a specifically Midwestern gothic which contradicts the notion of a rural idyll through the trope

of labor, familial and psychic strife, and evinces archivists of the abject who disinter the dearth of historical knowledge.<sup>7</sup>

*Wisconsin Death Trip* can be located within the specific conventional bounds of the gothic. In her book entitled *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick outlines the format of a gothic text. She explains:

A fully legible manuscript or an uninterrupted narrative is rare; rarer still is the novel whose story is comprised by a single narrator, without the extensive interruption into the middle of the book of a new history with a new historian; rarest of all is the book presented by the author, in her or his own person, without a pseudonym and an elaborate account of the provenance and antiquity of the supposedly original manuscript. (14)

The notion of a distinctive and antique manuscript is true of Lesy's profuse explanation of the archive and sociological history, and the inclusive concatenation of voices. Sedgwick delimits the characteristic preoccupations of the gothic as "sleeplike and deathlike states, doubles, affinities between narrative and pictorial art, unnatural echoes or silences, the unspeakable, the poisonous effects of guilt and shame, apparitions from the past, civil insurrections and fires, the charnel house and the madhouse" (9). Sedgwick's inventory reads like a replica of the images and incidents prevalent in Lesy's text. This gothic register is paralleled in the postmortem photographs, the relation between the "cold, sardonic" voice "like black marble" of Frank Cooper and the rigidly inanimate pictorial portraits, the "organized body of incendiaries" and the "aberration of mind" which results in the repeated declaration of "Admitted to the Mendota State Asylum for the Insane", the unnatural repetition of figures inverted as if in a mirror image or refracted as in a kaleidoscope, sudden disappearances due to claims of incest and rape, the seizure of "obscene matter" in the mail, the stark

doubling of scenes representing the natural world in health and decay, the silence of rational, economical and statistical explanation, and the numerous apparitions from the past caught on the silver emulsion plates of Charley Van Shaik. The text itself can be seen as an archival charnel house as it houses the psychological skeleton of the visual and verbal social network of the 1890s. The text's depiction of disease and dis-ease, represented in the numerous epidemics and the obsolete nature of an endemically fragmented narrative, also prove Sedgwick's statement that, "The ravages of a noiseless, subterranean, invisible disease, the threatening presence of the unintelligible and the incommunicable – these utterly characteristic accretions only accentuate the Gothic posture of febrile immobility" (85).

This incoherent and immobile posturing lends itself to the melancholy gaze of allegory, which views history as a "petrified ... landscape" and a "heap of fragments" (Seyhan 238-239). The trope of allegory is organized according to semiotic rifts and in this case, may find its place in the ruptured seamless narrative of national progress. *Wisconsin Death Trip* is not concerned with mastery of the object, but with the hieroglyphic staccato of faces, hands, obituaries and tittle-tattle. What they suggest is the atrophy of the Frontier Thesis, the disillusionment of a generation of pioneers who experienced "bitterness and fury [as] the natural offspring of impossibly great expectations" (Savoy 18), whose puritanical stoicism and Calvinistic work ethic proved arduous constraints, and whose work and labor prove fruitless. We are presented with 'paradise lost' and the illusory aspect of innocence which is symbolized by the

pictorial representation of the wizened crone who resolutely overlooks the untimely death of a small child, the prevalence of infant mortality, the collage which superimposes the slogan “NO LABOR NO REWARD” upon a funereal arrangement, and the positioning of a funeral wreath amidst women searching and seeking under the hot sun. The fret of farm life, the toll of disease, those who got “shack-wacky”, the fall from a “*Special Destiny*” to the “*sack cloth and ashes ... of failure*”: “relentless sweeps the stroke of fate” in *Wisconsin Death Trip*. Lesy provides an allegory of a pathological epidemic, one that is characterized by disillusionment and failure.

A quote from Edgar Lee Masters’ *Spoon River Anthology* is included in the final section of the book which reads, “Sometimes a man’s life turns into a cancer from being bruised and continually bruised, and swells into a purplish mass, like growths on stalks of corn.” This metaphor summarizes the allegorical intent of *Wisconsin Death Trip* which reflects the infection of the pure small-town American soul. This may be elaborated using a quote from Thomas de Quincey:

The situation here contemplated exposes a dreadful ulcer, lurking far down in the depths of human nature. It is not that men generally are summoned to face such awful trials. But potentially, and in shadowy outline, such a trial is moving subterraneously in perhaps all men’s natures. Upon the secret mirror of our dreams such a trial is darkly projected, perhaps, to every one of us. That dream, so familiar to childhood, of meeting a lion, and, through languishing prostration in hope and the energies of hope, that constant sequel of lying down before the lion, publishes the secret frailty of human nature, reveals its deep-seated falsehood to itself – records its abysmal treachery. Perhaps not one of us escapes this dream; perhaps, as by some sorrowful doom of man, that dream repeats for every one of us, through every generation, the original temptation in Eden. (qtd. in Sedgwick 70)

The lion in this case represents the emotions felt by the disillusioned country people who for the first time saw the socioeconomic system of the United States

as a “trap” (Lesy, *Wisconsin*). We are reminded of Hamlin Garland’s short story “Under the Lion’s Paw” which appeared in his 1891 collection *Main-Travelled Roads*. The story depicts “the muck of the furrows, black and tenacious as tar” of a Dakota farm (133). Homeless Haskins, with a “pathetic” face works diligently, experiencing the “ferocity of labor” to purchase a farm from the speculator Butler (142). Garland describes Haskins, “dripping with sweat, arms aching, filled with briers, fingers raw and bleeding,” but Butler pays no heed to his hard work as it has increased the value of the farm and could be sold to a higher bidder. On discovery of this disheartening fact, “Haskins sat down blindly on a bundle of oats near by, and with staring eyes and drooping head went over the situation. He was under the lion’s paw. He felt a horrible numbness in his heart and limbs” (149). This encourages Haskins to threaten Butler with a pitchfork, deforming his own innocent character. Haskins realized the inequitable nature of his position and his shame at being a homeless and cheated man. The populace of Lesy’s text also succumbed to feelings of shame, anger and paranoia which demonstrated their treachery to the democratic republic. The temptations they felt were to take license to violence against property, the community and oneself, and to discover knowledge in frail mortality and death.

Here we move into the realm of the abject, whose utmost fear is “death infecting life” (Kristeva 4). The internal ulcers and the cankers in the population provide evidence that all is not wholesome in the land. This aspect of Lesy’s text parallels the media response to Harmony Korine’s 1997 film *Gummo*, whereby one critic exclaimed, “Come and smell the rotting corpse of America while it

lasts” (Guthmann). Lesy’s archival exposé of “records of flesh” parallels a newsworthy incident in his book whereby, “At the funeral of George Smith ... one of the cross staves supporting the casket broke, letting it plunge forward, breaking the coffin” thus revealing that which should be contained. The abject is a “terror that disassembles,” and Lesy’s fragmentary and morbid text represents the putrefaction of the body politic. As Julia Kristeva elucidates in *Powers of Horror: An Essay On Abjection* (1982), “The clean and proper (in the sense of the incorporated and the incorporable) becomes filthy, the sought-after turns into the banished, fascination into shame” (8). This implies the ostracized reputation of *Wisconsin Death Trip* and the purportedly vulgar material it presents in terms of both content and the historical imagination. Lesy’s text, as a ‘terror that disassembles’ threatens the seamlessly sealed clean and proper body of, in this case, the national narrative, interrogating the myths promulgated by the progressive optimists. The Mid West is no longer perceived as a fertile and pleasant retreat, but as a location of mental, pecuniary and bodily destitution. In describing rural Ohio, a superior destination in the 1830s and 40’s, satirical gothic author Ambrose Bierce recalled in 1883, “The malarious farm, the west, fungus grown wildwood,/ The chills then contracted that since have remained./ The scum-covered duck pond, the pigstye close by it,/ The ditch where the sour-smelling house drainage fell,/ The damp shaded dwelling, the foul barnyard night it....” (qtd. in Anderson, “Old Northwest” 97).

In the mid nineteenth century, Walt Whitman declared, “I do not doubt there is far more in trivialities, insects, vulgar persons, slaves, dwarfs, weeds, rejected



refuse, than I have supposed” (qtd. in Sontag 29). Lesy’s subversive composition of small-town Wisconsin includes incidental news broadcasts, which include racial slurs, tramps, and idiots, town gossip delineating witches and werewolves, and photographs including dwarves and snakes which suggest Whitman’s acute democratic vision. This is a vision which adheres to the true notion of democratic history, presenting a culture according to its imperfections, negligible details along with its ultimate desires. Lesy declares of those who deal with the moribund nature of life that:

For some reason, they have chosen to set up shop on the shores of a gigantic whirlpool, a place where transcendent visions, final truths, ultimate meanings, famous last words, and dying breaths swirl around, mixed with every kind of garbage, both physical and spiritual, every kind of cruelty and pain, every variety of lie and deception, every remnant of false hope and evasion, and all the most pathetic shreds of memory and forgetfulness. (*Forbidden* 6)

This notion of the fragmentary and the generic echoes postmodernism as an art “within the archive” and which has been labeled according to metaphors of denial. It also contains a schizophrenic syntax which registers the linguistic fragmentation of social life formulating a maelstrom of cultural wreckage. The postmodern scene has been described as “Baudrillard’s excremental culture,” a “technoscope [with] a body without organs (Artaud),” a “negative space (Rosalind Krauss),” a “pure implosion (Lyotard),” a “looking away (Barthes),” or an “aleatory mechanism (Serres)” (Hutcheon 8). Here postmodernism registers repulsion toward the ragman who refers to an abyss of historical representation. Lesy’s text harbors the detritus of history, that which could not be assimilated in the rhetoric of the American Dream. In this respect, he parallels Nordau’s

description of the highly gifted degenerate: “[They] frequently exercise a deep influence, but this is always a baneful one. ... If contemporaries do not recognize it, the historian of morals will point it out *a posteriori*. They, likewise, are leading men along the paths they themselves have found to new goals; but these goals are abysses or waste places” (24).

The investigation of the abyss or waste place corresponds to Jacques Derrida’s theory of the archive. It is interesting to note that archive derives from *arca*, meaning the cupboard (reminding one of the Cabinet of Wonders whose paraphernalia may include two-headed beasts and legendary artifacts), the coffin, the prison cell, or the cistern, thus intimating a space of secretion, desecration or superfluity. It is, as Barthes said of the photograph, an important archival object; “The only way I can transform [it] is into refuse: either the drawer or the wastebasket” as “like a living organism, it is born on the level of the sprouting silver grains, it flourishes a moment, then ages ... Attacked by light, by humidity, it fades, weakens, vanishes; there is nothing left to do but throw it away” (93). When recalling his first experience in the Wisconsin archive, Lesy explains the artifacts of death and decomposition which he held in his hands:

I saw the face of a young woman, dark-haired, dark-eyed, dressed in a black silk gown, standing behind her mother in a family portrait ... Above her head, the emulsion of the negative had so decayed that it looked as if the air around her had ruptured and turned to blood. Of course, this couldn’t be: it was only the length of the original exposure in the photographer’s studio that had frozen open her eyes. (*Forbidden* 12)

Derrida perceives those who mine the archive as exhibiting the ‘death drive.’ They compose repetitious gestures of ghostly auras, gathering together simulacra or impressions of the past. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes also claims that

photographs do not actively call up the past but refer to reality in a past state, as a living corpse as it were. He states that the *punctum*, or that piercing detail which renders the particularity of a photograph, which is visibly legible in historical photographs is the defeat of Time: “*that* is dead and *that* is going to die” (96). Indeed, Derrida posits that “the structure of the archive is *spectral*. It is spectral *a priori*: neither present nor absent “in the flesh,” neither visible nor invisible, a trace always referring to another whose eyes can never be met” (84). The archive, therefore, reveals the ghosts of the past which will never be a voice to challenge or debate the current of history they are reported as belonging to.

Derrida explains, “the archive takes place at the place of originary and structural breakdown of the said memory” (11). Lesy’s intimation of deathly historical artifacts not only deals with morose subject matter that threatens the master narrative of American progress, but also within itself reflects a heterogeneous discourse which threatens to reveal secrets, contradictions and ambiguities that threaten the possibility of *consignation*, or the gathering together of signs. This is evident in *Wisconsin Death Trip* as, for example, a local historian’s tale of Jacob Spaulding, who carved out his territory in the wilderness in a Slotkinian manner, is juxtaposed with a terse visual image of a stern well-dressed, middle-class woman on horseback, thus confusing Lesy’s description of early civilization. Lesy may thus be said to exhibit *en mal d’archive* or ‘archive fever’ which suggests the “topology of catastrophe” put forward by Kristeva (9). As Kristeva explains, “the Other no longer has a grip on the three apices of the triangle where subjective homogeneity resides; and so, it jettisons the object into

an abominable real, inaccessible except through jouissance” (9). She explains that when one experiences jouissance, the “I” is heterogenous:

Discomfort, unease, dizziness stemming from an ambiguity that, through the violence of a revolt *against*, demarcates a space out of which signs and objects arise. This braided, woven, ambivalent, a heterogeneous flux marks out a territory that I can call my own. (10).

What Lesy depicts, therefore, is the exiled and the alienated; his method of compiling diverse archival components and layering a disconcert of signs represents the deject who can neither belong nor obtain his or her bearings in a master narrative. In this archival discourse of the exile, “Each layer seems to gape slightly, as the lips of a wound” (Derrida 20) and each voice, each face seems placed in an abyss of reason or subject to a process of suturing estrangement.

Lesy composes montages which suture the portrait of a figure and its mirror image together. These doubles suggests the uncanny, the startling realization of the self as unfamiliar which also suggests “a vortex of summons and repulsion [which] places the one haunted by it literally beside himself” (Kristeva 1). He evinces a rift in the self which registers a trauma in the subject. The subversion of the figures suggests a foreign position of alienation. This phantom of the self suggests a Manichean dualism between hope and dismay, between victory and failure, suggesting an otherness in one’s history and representing “a burden both repellent and repelled, a deep well of memory that is [both] unapproachable and intimate” (Kristeva 6). Lesy’s method also suggests the early treatment of insanity in asylums, pertinent due to the fact that his text is populated with the insane admitted to the Mendota Asylum, and that the town today still retains an

institutionalized population which is “**significantly above state average**” (Black River Falls, Wisconsin). According to French historian Michel Foucault in *Madness and Civilization*, mirrors were placed within the community of madmen whereby the madman was “imprisoned ... in an infinitely self-referring observation” (265). Foucault states that “Awareness was now linked to the shame of being identical to that other, of being comprised in him, and of already despising oneself before being able to recognize or to know oneself” (265). The image of uncanny recognition corresponds to the gothic mechanism that acknowledges the cultural contradictions and horrors which undermine the nation’s claim to innocence and purity, leading to a deeper understanding of national identity. The other facet of the use of mirrors in the asylum is “*Perpetual Judgement*” through which, “as by silence, madness is ceaselessly called upon to judge itself” (Foucault 265). This shrewdness parallels the introspective Puritanical character of the American who, as Lesy suggests, is overwrought by the burden of Calvinistic sin and depravity. Lesy suggests that that which is unapproachable in the American psyche are obsessional fears of injury, shame, death and decay which citizens have attempted to control through a regime of paranoid scrutiny which also attempts to isolate the impure, the sinful and the immoral. What is evident in *Wisconsin Death Trip* is an archaic economy of “*narcissistic crisis*” (Kristeva 14) whereby a terrible distinction is made between prosperity, gentility, dominion, and success, and “pure and simple failure.”

This sense of narcissistic crisis is also registered in Michael Lesy’s book entitled *Dreamland: America at the Dawn of the Twentieth Century* (1997). The

chronological pictorial trail begins in 1900, the year that *Wisconsin Death Trip* concluded. Lesy's pictorial narrative ironically upholds the master narrative of progress and "Special Destiny," depicting the "noble savage" in the section named "Natives in Costume" and stereotypical portraits of cowboys on the rude frontier under the heading "Real Men." These images represent the onward march of progress suggested by Turner's Frontier Thesis, and the title *Dreamland* upholds the view of America as a land of hope and opportunity. What is alluded to is the desire to sustain a homogenous and hegemonic tale suitable to a patriotic discourse that maintains the grandiose motif of a "City Upon a Hill." However, mythology was challenged in the revisionist histories of the 1970s (published in the era when Lesy completed his first book) which followed war, social change, radical grassroots movements, the challenge of the progressive movement, and presidential impeachments, which contested conventional interpretations and nationalist, bourgeois and racist concerns. Lesy prefaces the text with a quote from T. S. Eliot's *Gerontion* (1920) which alludes to the "foul lining" of history (Kristeva 20). The quote begins, "After such knowledge, what forgiveness? Think now/ History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors/ And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,/ Guides us by vanities." Here Lesy infers the conceited nature of historical and ideological discourse in the United States.

In *Dreamland*, Lesy attempts to converse with the conceited hegemonic production of history, coupling the grand photographs of William Henry Jackson and the Detroit Publishing Company with disasters and the beleaguered elements of foreign and domestic policy and policymakers. He notes the glaring absences

in this pictorial narrative of harmony and luxury, including “the tenements and airless rooms, ... the epidemics, adulterated food, impoverishments, strikes, brutalities, and corruption” (xiii). Lesy makes the harsh indictment that, “What we now know to be true we have learned only because of the passage of time: the arrow of progress that these people – our ancestors – shot into the air has landed in our backs” (xiv). He declares, “The moments when these pictures were made was like the instant – strangely painless – after a deep clean, knife wound ... all the toxins we now live with were being let loose” (xiv). What he refers to are the poisons of environmental damage, the growth of big business and the accompanying fraudulence and economic vulnerability, and the exoticization of racial minorities. The images of affirmation, including Times Square and the Flatiron Building, steam freighters and railroad terminals, Niagara Falls, Thunder Mountain and “Cowboys at Lunch,” provide an example of the master narrative that *Wisconsin Death Trip* serves to undermine, and also provides short statements which worry and unsettle the text. For example, when discussing negotiations regarding the Panama Canal, Lesy notes “President Roosevelt responded by calling the Colombians “dagos”,” disasters include such facts as “A fire in the Iroquois Theater in Chicago killed 588 people,” and dire incidents reported include the fact that “architect Stanford White was shot and killed by Pittsburgh millionaire Harry K. Thaw during a musical revue in a restaurant on the roof of Madison Square Garden” (62,107).

What Lesy’s texts stand in conjunction to is a paranoid and narcissistic discourse which attempted to frame the historical imagination according to the

ideals of the early republic. This condition could be described in the terms of psychoanalysis that Lesy applies in his conclusion to *Wisconsin Death Trip*, which also relates to Richard Hofstadter's 1964 declaration of the "paranoid style" in American political and social life:

A person who is afraid of being overwhelmed by fantasies resulting from inadequately repressed anal impulses lives in horror of those physical or metaphysical empty spaces in whose far reaches live the barely secret temptations that will make him lose all control. A person obsessed by anal fantasies will indulge in compulsive acts to void, disguise, or fill such empty spaces of threatening imagination.

Lesy proves that in the historical archives such "threatening imagination" could be uncovered which challenges psychological and mythical security.

Derrida explains, the "trouble with the archive is – what inhibits sight and knowledge, but also the trouble of troubled and troubling affairs." The archive contains the "trouble of secrets, of plots, of clandestineness, of half-private, half-public conjurations, always at the unstable limit between public and private, between the family, the society, and the state, between the family and an intimacy even more private than the family, between oneself and oneself" (90). These troubling secrets will be later be illuminated in a discussion of Midwestern Gothic texts.

The abyssal waste place that Lesy mines thus reveals the voices and faces which could trouble the logocentric view of history. As a feature of the Midwestern Gothic, an antique, document, or artifact provides a link to historical and familial secrets which depict the alienation of the subject from the family, him or herself and, ultimately from the national narrative of grandiose western history or the compulsion toward the supernatural holiness of the Midwestern



Protestant values of “abstinence, frugality, and independence – the home grown, made-on-the-farm trinity” (Rice 137). Lesy introduces men with likeness to nineteenth-century iconoclast authors Robert Ingersoll, Ambrose Bierce and E. W. Howe who experienced paternal failure to seize opportunities in an open, dynamic society, “a contagious frontier faith in democracy” and oppressive fundamental religious enthusiasm (Bierce’s mother, direct descendent of William Bradford, being the “pious old lady at home after service singing ‘Plunged in a Gulf of Dark Despair’”), and a young life of hard work and distasteful farming (Anderson, “Old Northwest” 98-100). As Howe declared in *The Story of a Country Town* (1883), “I became early impressed with the fact that our people seemed to be miserable and discontented, and frequently wondered that they did not load their effects on wagons again, and move away from a place which made all men surly and rough, and the women pale and fretful.... (qtd. in Anderson, “Old Northwest” 111).

These unsettling Midwestern texts thus depict the “vulgar persons” or “rejected refuse” which were unassimilated in the march of progress. In these texts, subject matter such as adultery, murder, deceit, and the destruction of community coincide with the perversion of innocence as civilization is revealed as a fall from grace, a morbid trap or a dog-eat-dog existence. The wilderness is represented by the destructive power of nature which enhances the style and content of the texts as fragmentary and immobile, suggesting their potential as gothic allegories. Most strikingly is the prevalent use of visual vignettes and the faces and bodies which register the place “where meaning collapses” and there is

a “failure to recognize ... kin,” whereby “nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory” (Kristeva 5). These uncanny pictures reveal that the promise of the American Dream was exceedingly stilted.

## Chapter 2: "Life is a mystery, everyone must stand alone": The Literature and Film of Midwestern Gothic

"I have not lost faith. I proclaim that. I have only been brought to the place where I know my faith will not be realized...."

Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*

*Wisconsin Death Trip* may be elucidated by placing it in a tradition of Midwestern literature and film dealing with the subject matter of familial and national grievance and the stylistically obscure. The texts discussed in this chapter are also either relatively unknown, deserving of greater contemporary scholarly attention, or are deemed 'cult' narrative thus seemingly inaccessible. Juxtaposing these texts discloses a thematic unity which, in turn, provides a coherent thesis of Midwestern Gothic. The novels and films span a broad time period, produced from 1919 to 2003. They deal with the late nineteenth century, the dawning of the twentieth century, and the decades of the fifties and the eighties, thus spanning the decades through which *Wisconsin Death Trip* originated, delved into the territory of nostalgic excavation, and culminated in the postmodern era. The novels and films address a past that wavers between the disastrous and the heartbreaking, reveling in death and the underbelly of promises, dreams and grand truths. They light out upon a territory that is out of bounds; they deject or stray into a historic and psychic region that challenges the grand narrative of affirmation. As Glenway Wescott explains in *The Grandmothers: A Family Portrait*:

[I]t was an instinctive law for Americans, the one he had broken. Never be infatuated with nor try to interpret as an omen the poverty, the desperation, of the past; whoever remembers it will be punished, or punish himself; never remember. Upon pain of loneliness, upon pain of a sort of expatriation though at home. ... The past was by nature tragic. No tragic arts ought to flourish; tragedy was treason, the betrayal of state

secrets to the enemy, even the enemy in one's self. Memory was incest.... (299)

In this sense, memory has become taboo, that which must be repressed as a primitive instinct. Revelation in the case of these texts discloses toil, shame, disillusionment and a courage that could only wreak disaster. They divulge that the "prosaic chroniclers" of Lesy's text had indeed captured the adulterated and long repressed spirit of the Middle West.

## 2.1 Literature

Excerpts from Glenway Wescott's *The Grandmothers* intersperse the pictorial and media accounts in Lesy's text. Formulating what Lesy terms a "vein" of the piece, Wescott's text could be read as an artery or lifeblood of the work. His formulation of memory, the attitude of the pioneer descendents and the central profusion of macabre portraits which appear in a chapter entitled "The Dead. His Grandmother's Final Grief. The Photograph Albums," reveal Wescott's more than supplementary influence on *Wisconsin Death Trip*. *The Grandmothers* traces the attempt of Alwyn Tower to piece together his family history and "the long series of passions which had in the end produced himself" (6). The novel portrays the long and arduous history of the Tower family and the "wilderness of history and hearsay, that distorted landscape of a dream" which lies "buried under the plowed land, the feet of modern men, and the ripening crops" (9). Alwyn Tower seeks to discover the psyche of his ancestors but, like the gaping hole represented by the cistern or the outhouse - a popular motif in these texts - , he is afraid of "the abysses [with] which his elders dealt so carelessly and capably" (7). Into the darkness of the abyss his grandmother delves and her mind "like the rays of a magic lantern," "illuminated with disconnected pictures the darkness of many lives - in fact, the darkness of life itself" (6).

Memory is described in the novel as scrappy. Like a patchwork quilt it is stitched together through photographs, locks of hair, and short tales. Wescott portrays memory as an arcane ship which "grows ghostly and sinks in the sea; and one has to wait for the tides to cast on the beach, fragment by fragment the

awaited cargo” (6). This notion of disintegration and gathering together summarizes the method of Lesy’s text, which also composes the debris of the archive into a historical narrative. Furthermore, Wescott raises the difficulty of having these ghostly remnants ‘speak’, suggesting that these faces and traces of hair gesture to the past but the boy has “no hope of being answered, since [his ancestors] were dead” (13). He refers to the mute nature of the ancestors stating, “All the secrets of all the lives must be like that – they could not tell. All they could do was to hang such a picture on the wall, or merely in their hearts” (14). The concept of the unspeakable suggests, therefore, the ultimate futility in attempting to glean answers from a picture or artifact. These relics hold secrets, tales of a tragic past, and one can hope only to discover a suggestive emotion, a tone or a sentiment in the thing they possess.

Wescott elicits hope that these artifacts may indulge a sensation of the past as these seemingly silent relics represent “a monument having on the outside an appearance of solidity, but hollow within, where, like the few breaths of air which are imprisoned inside a bronze, the bitter-sweet of youth, passion, and disgrace would be secreted” (237). What the relics to the past reveal to Alwyn is a melancholy history, a “vast and somber picture” whereby the whole history of the family seemed “unmentionably sad” (119). His pioneering ancestors discovered in Wisconsin a legacy of hard labor, “failed plans and unmaterialized dreams” and a lovelorn and isolated existence (35). The “hard, loving faces” that are revealed to him are “all scarred with shadows” (148).<sup>8</sup> Alwyn thus discovers a “family

birthright of anxiety, ambition, loneliness” (197). He constructs an essay relating his family history which proclaims of the Towers, the “perpetual pioneers”:

*Two younger sons had been obliged to come to America in search of fortune. They had failed to find it; their descendents were still seeking, seeking among fools and brutes. Superior men, cheated of their inheritance, disguised as inferiors and unable to reveal themselves.... They said little, but this conviction took possession of all their minds: they were not born to be beasts of burden; they should not have to work as these others worked; they were not menials, but deserved a sweeter fate; life was unjust. This conviction was inherited by every Tower, from father to son; and in that inheritance younger son shared equally with elder. A grievance was their birthright. (28)*

Alwyn’s dismal concept of labor reflects a motto included in *Wisconsin Death Trip* which reads, “Work is the Law of Life.”<sup>9</sup> His statements contradict the “myth of the garden” which was initially evident in the pastoral ethic of the Jeffersonian economy whereby rural sufficiency lead to psychic balance and in such texts as Robert Beverley’s *History and Present State of Virginia* (1705). Beverley depicts a primitive utopia “without the Curse of Industry, their Diversion alone, and not their Labour, supplying their Necessities ... none of the Toils of Husbandry were exercised by this happy People” (qtd. in Marx 80). As Henry Nash Smith explains, the image of a vast and growing agricultural society became “a collective representation, a poetic idea ... that defined the promise of American life. The master symbol of the garden embraced a cluster of metaphors expressing fecundity, growth, increase, and blissful labor in the earth” (qtd. in Marx 142). This mythology is countered in Wescott’s historical vision.

According to Wescott’s pioneers, America was perceived as a talent to master, demanding the aptitude and faculty of its settlers to govern, master and till the land. America was a talent “Lent, not given; to be guarded and risked and

multiplied and used to the glory of God, the owner” (194). These individuals, however, seemed to berate that talent as one which they were not adept, not dedicated, and not humble enough for. Wescott reveals the restlessness and despair of those who believed they had failed and saw failure surround them in their personal relationships.

Those who did practice the talent of being an American seemed caught in a stoic, Puritanical trap, destined to “grow old angrily, like an innocent prisoner in a mysterious jail” (Wescott 147). Under the weight of this American onus, some characters developed what Lesy describes as “The character type of failure [which] is now called paranoid” (*Wisconsin*). Alwyn expresses, “*They grieved, but stifled their grief, being ashamed of it; for if they worked harder, if they had lead purer lives, if they still worked harder....*” (24). Alwyn’s ancestors developed the nervous traits of anxiety including paranoia and obsessive compulsive disorder. Lesy includes one tale which describes Alwyn’s Grandmother’s fetish for modesty, which also attempts to cloak the impurities of historical experience; “There was a history of the conquest of America with innumerable illustrations, in which the savages offered their daughters to the discoverers in dresses which she drew, and even the slain lay beneath shrouds as fanciful as valentines – the work of many weeks” (Wescott 263). These ancestors exhibit a strain for purity, attempting to “fulfill the command Keep Thyself Pure” as it relates to both life and national identity (Lesy, *Wisconsin*).

Wescott describes the characters in his novel as illiterate mystics, those who were governed by grand practices and beliefs but who could not seem to fathom



the temperament to which they aspired. These enigmatic characters are presented in a photograph album to Alwyn, who is then acquainted with the “disastrous comedies” of their lives (120). Alwyn’s description of this album reflects the effect that Lesy attempts to create in his visual anecdotes:

[H]eads and busts and family groups, pygmy men and women as if seen through a telescope – the men in daydream, the women anxious about their children, their lovers, their clothes. Mouths like bits of carved wax, nostrils of an insatiable arrogance; eyes long closed in death ... The lifeless light ... half hid and half revealed all the possible combinations of all the motives there were – greed and sensuality and courage and compassion and cruelty and nostalgia; all the destinies there were – manias, consolations, regrets. (121)

Wescott captures the melancholy emotion that Lesy intends the viewer to experience when reading his text. Although we do not know the particular tale or identity behind each picture, we experience the “secretion” of affect.

Wescott describes, “Each picture was a tomb where a dead heart ... lay buried – buried with its affections, its apathy, its fury” (121). The pictures symbolize children dead of disease, husbands killed, men and women who drank and hoarded excessively. Lesy’s photography evokes such characters as are depicted in Wescott’s book, for example, Mr. Peter Greeley, the notorious miser who lived in sin and misery but who was depicted in a daguerreotype as a young man of twenty-three with “An anxious effeminate face; his moistened hair combed low on his forehead, resembling the parallel strokes of a pen” (125). The disjunction between outward appearance and emotional insight demonstrates the ambiguities between an internal and external life, leading us to believe that the deferential portraits included in *Wisconsin Death Trip* may also conceal inner desolation. The exposition of internal and external layers suggests the gothic convention of

“an X within an X,” or a story within a story which “represents the broadest structural application of the ... thematic convention of the unspeakable,” having a similar relation to the convention of live burial (Sedgwick 20). These faces thus act as a key to the repressed narrative of malaise in the bucolic setting.

Another portrait depicts Mr. Homer O’Sullivan, the “well-educated, unsuccessful man” who looks ill at ease in the photograph as it had “paralyzed a singular restlessness of mind and body” (126), and Mr. and Mrs. A. Rollo whose eyes “are looking, not for what they desire, but for the body of desire itself, lost and perhaps dead” (132). Indeed, Wescott depicts in his portraits a country where “avidity had never been assuaged,” or had been abandoned altogether (295). However, the trope of America’s Manifest Destiny still remains a staple mythic commodity as Wescott states of the Midwestern country, “It had not kept its promise, so it was still the promised land” (295).

Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* exhibits a similar spiritual disorientation to that of *Wisconsin Death Trip* and *The Grandmothers*. Aspiring artist Max Wald lent Anderson a copy of Edgar Lee Masters’ *Spoon River Anthology* (1915) – excerpts from which are included in Lesy’s text – which Anderson devoured in one night. Much like *Spoon River*, *Winesburg, Ohio* also marks the “effect of our life-denying life: sin and disease and death,” displaying “the conflict of American life against its own rigid forms” (Sutton 431). *Winesburg* depicts the monomanias which are evident in an array of Midwestern gothic texts, including “Misogyny, inarticulateness, frigidity, God-infatuation, homosexuality, drunkenness” (Howe 99). Anderson believed that the crudity of

American thought and society was a fact which must be taken into consideration in the presentation of life. He stressed that American literature must face the limitations of its people, representing the heart and reality of American life, and stating that the true novelist “is a man gone a little mad with the life of his times” (*Winesburg* xx). Indeed, the reaction to Anderson’s text included charges of ““Neuroticism!” “Obscenity!” and “Exaggeration!”” (*Winesburg* xxiii). Like Lesy, Anderson revealed the pathological aspects of the people of Winesburg; their obsessions and their fears, to produce what Hart Crane declared as “the truth about our small mid-western towns” (xxiii).

Anderson’s truth, however, also oscillates between a tone of “acceptance and denial,” again illuminating the schizophrenic nature of the American psyche. In his *Mid-American Chants* (1918) he declared, “I have heard gods whispering in the corn and wind/.... I have run back to gods, to prayers and dreams,” asserting “Westward the field of the cloth of gold” (Sutton 406, 404). *Windy McPherson’s Son* (1916) also denotes the desire for a “satisfactory end,” illustrating “an upward and onward note in all the early pages of the book, a boy, coming out of an Iowa corn-shipping town to rise in the business world, that fitted into the American mood of the day” (Pearson 103). *Winesburg*, however, reveals the obverse side of this optimism. Anderson begins his collection of what could arguably be considered vignettes, short stories or sketches with a chapter entitled “The Book of the Grotesque” which details a writer, seemingly ludicrous with old age. The writer, lying in bed one night, imagines a host of characters whose staunch faith in the truths of the world made them “grotesque”. These truths include, “the truth of

virginity and the truth of passion, the truth of wealth and of poverty, of thrift and of profligacy” (5). The espousal of social truths, or an aloft social mythology, results in the distortion of man’s vision and the investment in false dreams and goals (Anderson *Sherwood Anderson* 40, 41, 49). Indeed, cultural critic Edward Watts writes of John and Jo in E.A. Howe’s *The Story of a Country Town* (1883):

[T]hey bore the larger burden of not only creating a good society but – more importantly – the “most American of all places.” Haunted by the inevitability of failing to meet this ideal, John and Jo, like all colonials, lack the imaginative flexibility to disassociate themselves or their community from the idealizing and universalizing role they have been given as part of the realization of the grandeur of Manifest Destiny.” (190)

The men who cling to these aloft ideals are included in “The Book of the Grotesque,” which was never published but made an “indelible impression” on the narrator’s mind (5). They become immobile and arcane wreckage as opposed to the vibrancy of the “young thing inside” which saved the old man (6). We can infer that the old writer, from whom the narrator derived his inspiration, was none other than George Willard, newspaper reporter for the *Winesburg Eagle* who documented the stories and townsfolk of his community.

What the fictional Willard compiled in his imagination were memories of the townsfolk who aid his realization that “he must live and die in uncertainty, a thing blown by the winds, a thing destined like corn to wilt in the sun” (219). The tales of his neighbors reveal that any attempt to adhere to a particular creed, even that of life and death, leads to unhealthy obsession and insanity. A particular tale that resonates is that of the fanatic Jesse Bentley. Jesse’s pioneer ancestors moved from New York state to the Middle West, becoming poverty-stricken farmers

whereby, "Plows run through the fields caught on hidden roots, stones lay all about, on the low places water gathered, and the young corn turned yellow, sickened and died" (46). The narrator relates:

The four young men of the family worked hard all day in the fields, they ate heavily of coarse, greasy food, and at night slept like tired beasts on beds of straw. Into their lives came little that was not coarse and brutal and outwardly they themselves were coarse and brutal. (46)

This notion of being coarse and brutal seems to be a family inheritance, like the hereditary nature of degeneracy described by sociologists Robert Dugdale and Frank Blackmar, if not characterizing the majority of the citizens of Winesburg who attempt to cloak themselves in respectability, in the same manner. The narrator explains that a "crude and animal-like poetic fervor" possessed the Bentley boys and manifested itself in Jesse. He strove to make his life a thing of great importance, desiring production, land and power. The narrator relates, "Jesse's mind went back to the men of Old Testament days who had also owned lands and herds. He remembered how God had come down out of the skies and talked to these men and he wanted God to notice and talk to him also" (51). The myth of Manifest Destiny is alluded to as Jesse ruminates, "The land that lay stretched out before him became of vast significance, a place peopled by his fancy with a new race of men sprung from himself" (52). He longed for the "atmosphere of old times and places" and longed for a son named David who would parallel the biblical shepherd and King. Jesse's vision is reminiscent of the epigraph included in Ole Edvart Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth* (1927), which is taken from Genesis 6:4; "There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bore

children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown.” *Giants in the Earth* was also a narrative of pioneer hardship and the oppressiveness of open space, although on the plains of the Dakota Territory.<sup>10</sup> Jesse’s neurotic daughter Louise eventually gives birth to a son, David, and Jesse decided to take the boy and make a sacrifice to God. Jesse’s fanatic desire to rule a fertile kingdom was destroyed as he terrified the boy and apprehended that he had become “too greedy for glory” (84). He became invested in the avaricious splendor of a mythic, heady pioneer life, thus illustrating the narrowness and distortion of vision which lead to barbarous monomaniacal tendencies.

Hands are a striking motif throughout this text, echoing Lesy’s collages of hands which waver between community and friendship, and idleness and alienation, or are depicted as rheumatic and gnarled, suggesting the labor of hard work and discontent. The first chapter in *Winesburg, Ohio* is entitled “Hands” and those of Wing Biddlebaum are described as “fluttering pennants of promise” for a dreamed of “pastoral golden age” (12,11). These hands seemingly represent productive labor as Winesburg was proud of these hands in the same spirit in which it was proud of “Banker White’s new stone house and Wesley Moyer’s bay stallion” (10). However, these hands symbolize a restless energy to indulge in perverse and compulsive acts. No longer a symbol of productive labor, craftsmanship and close ties, hands are implicated in the molestation of young boys, the dictation of obscene thoughts onto scraps of paper, and the bloodstained hands of Dr. Parcival are even implicated in brutal murders from Chicago to Ohio. The hands represent a compulsive disorder, described by Lesy as “a

response to intolerable states of subjective and objective anxiety, hostility, or despair,” (*Wisconsin*) which is paralleled by the Priest’s repetitious desire to see the carnal flesh of Kate Swift, the compulsive quips of Ebenezer Cowley, the “Queer” man of the village, and the mental acuity of Joe Welling, the “Man of Ideas” that echoes the men in Lesy’s text who strove to invent perpetual motion. Those who are not continually agitated by life, are perceived as the clods and dullards of the town. They may amount to little, but bolster the refrain that “many people must live and die alone” (103). Indeed, the suicide of Windpeter Winters, which conforms and corresponds to the anecdotes in *Wisconsin Death Trip*, reveals the desire not to live an emasculated, lonely and unproductive life:

They said that old Windpeter stood up on the seat of his wagon, raving and swearing at the onrushing locomotive, and that he fairly screamed with delight when the team, maddened by his incessant slashing at them, rushed straight ahead to certain death. ... Most boys have seasons of wishing they could die gloriously instead of just being grocery clerks and going on with their humdrum lives. (187).

The yearning to escape to a more prosperous and unencumbered existence is finally realized by George Willard, who at the denouement of the text leaves on a train bound for Chicago to escape the stigmas of shame and entrapment which characterize the country.

Pope Brock’s 1999 novel *Indiana Gothic* exposes a family history which lay “buried” or repressed for nearly eighty years. The episode of “adultery and murder in an American family” contributed to familial shame concealed by a puritanical backlash of “rigid and desperate decorum” which pervaded the household during Brock’s childhood (vii). The records of the events which occurred during the first decade of the twentieth century in Indiana were, for the

most part, destroyed, leaving Brock to trace a fragmentary record and immerse himself in temporal and geographical research. The story depicts turn of the century Indiana in much the same respect as *Wisconsin Death Trip*. The countryside was laden with religious fanatics, temperance crusaders, vigilante groups including the Black Avengers, and epidemics of smallpox and tuberculosis. Brock emphasizes the effect of religion on his ancestors, espousing the notion of original sin as a pertinent biblical context. His ancestor, Ham Dillon, recalls the stigma attached to farming life according to the actions of Adam and Eve:

*"Cursed is the ground for thy sake"...*

*"In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread!"...*

God condemning Adam and Eve to be farmers. ... Ham had never much liked this part of the story, what it implied about his livelihood – that when God was casting around for a punishment, farming was the worst thing He could think of ... if you believed the Bible, farmers were all prisoners doing hard time in a penal colony. (124)

It appears that throughout the historical reconstruction of the lives of the Dillon and Hale families, each person struggles to master or escape the drudgery of the life which surrounds them. Brock's narrative recounts the events which occurred to two sisters, Maggie and Allie, and their husbands, Ham and Lincoln Hale. Ham aspires to be a top notch politician in Indianapolis, aided by the determination of his wife to assume an honorable position. Allie married a schoolteacher and, disenchanted with her marriage, engages in a passionate affair with her sister's husband. After several years and the birth of an illicit child, Link finally discovers the two lovers and descends into emotional and religious mania. On his way to a sanitarium in Battle Creek, Michigan, he makes a rash and



temporary stop to take care of monetary business and is caught up in a political rally in which Ham is the star candidate. Overwhelmed by tumultuous emotions, Link fires five shots and Ham dies from the poisonous wounds inflicted. Throughout the text, it is implied that the family feels under the spell of God's curse, leaving them prey to original sin and the punishment of odious ground. In an artifact discovered by Brock, Allie Thompson wrote on October 24, 1888, the day before her marriage to Hardin Lincoln Hale, "Of course you'll expect something original,/ But I'll tell you before I begin,/ That there's nothing original in me,/ Excepting Original Sin" (67). Allie is also haunted by the religious culture of the time and the emphasis placed upon the value of one's spirit. As Lesy explains, "rural and country town culture was primarily an elaboration of secular Calvinism and Smithian egoism, [whereby] a man's success and a man's failure were judged to be reflections of his soul" (*Wisconsin*). As her son lies suffering from what she speculates could be T.B. but which is in fact the croup, Allie contemplates, "*If he dies, it's a judgment on me*" (7). As she considers the arduous life of her family, and her own misdeeds, she is pushed to "the ragged edge of hysteria" (7).

Brock documents the toils faced by the members of the Hale family, those who have no ties to the Age of Optimism evident in the emergent metropolis. In a conversation with Dr. Busby, a staff specialist from Five Oaks sanitarium, it is revealed that "More farm wives go crazy in Indiana than anyone else" (166). Indeed, in *Wisconsin Death Trip*, Lesy includes an excerpt from Hamlin Garland which acknowledges "these bedraggled and weary wives," with their "forlorn,

aimless and pathetic wandering up and down the street.” Lesy also includes the fate of one farm wife, Mary Karban, wife of Wenzel Karban, a farmer of the town of Neva, who “committed suicide by eating the heads of 4 boxes of matches.” Allie, who gains courage from her adulterous relationship with the budding politician, finds resonance in the thought of these women as Brock narrates, “She would think of all the women beaten down by farm life, by the loneliness and crushing labor. She didn’t feel so fragile as to fear that she would join them, but it haunted her to know they were there” (166).

Not only is Allie frenzied by her home life, which does little to reinforce the sanctity of the American family, but her son Denton becomes disenchanted with country life and the disjunction between rural reticence and the antediluvian nature of his surroundings, and the progressive enlightenment of the city. Denton’s isolation is revealed as he makes a pilgrimage to the barn whose “vastness and musty peace ... somehow soothed his loneliness” (157). The barn houses an old Johnson hammerless revolver which Denton becomes increasingly enamored with as an instrument of powerful respite. On one particularly morose day, when Denton’s feelings of isolation from “civilization and hope” are exacerbated, he tramps the revolver to the “necessity house,” “trailing failure” (158). Inside the outhouse, he lifts down a Sears, Roebuck catalogue, whose pages of “earthly delights” intended to have a soothing effect upon the indigent and isolated; “it made farmers feel like part of things. They could live out to hell and gone but even so, thanks to the catalogue, they could belong to the U.S.A.; they could share in the explosion of goods that was coming to be called the

American way of life” (159). Denton, however, perceives the catalogue as a tool of derision. He compares his “unmentionable location” – the outhouse – to the plush, unspoiled commodities in the catalogue, feeling mocked by “the good life, minutely itemized” (159). Feeling mentally contaminated, his mind, like the land, “a malarial bog,” Denton stumbles across an advertisement for a porcelain bowl, and acknowledging the admonishing rebuke to his lowly life, he lifts the revolver and shoots himself in the stomach.

Denton’s father and Allie’s husband, Link, also suffers from the mental diseases of the age. Burdened with a struggle to achieve a good wage and respect from his family, and also with the suspicion of his wife’s affair and the illegitimate child, he descends into mania and temporary insanity whereby he shoots Ham Dillon, the converse symbol of his fortune. Throughout his life he suffers the threatening burden of emasculation, and deems his success in the murder trial as his “last chance to ... be a brave man” (356). Like the citizens who populate Lesy’s text, Link is diagnosed as a neurasthenic, “a new sort of disorder that’s arisen just in the past decade or two ... caused by the general movement in our society ... away from physical labor and toward mental labor” (301). The symptoms include “Tenderness in the scalp, teeth, or gums. Abnormal secretions. Chills, heat flashes, morbid fears, headaches” and is treated by electric shocks, arsenic, strychnine, and quinine (302-303). Throughout the trial, Link is judged according to turn of the century definitions of mania which correspond to the archaic classifications in *Wisconsin Death Trip*. The prosecutor asks to what extent Link has been “noisy, profane, obscene, restless, destructive,

filthy, ... syphilitic, scrofulous, phtihisical, hysterical, choreic, deformed, intemperate, deaf, mute, blind, lame, or paralyzed” (270). The defendant does not evince signs from this catalog, but does demonstrate signs of religious mania, reciting passages from Revelations citing the abomination and filthiness of fornication, and also imparts the stories of Cain, who suffered the Divine rejection, and Job, who lost property, family, and health. Finally, Link’s insanity is blamed upon an inundation of “katastates” in the blood stream which are said to oppose “positive emotions, pure thoughts, the higher truths” and are a product of the evil feelings of fear and rage which are displayed when one is not in harmony with his or her environment (309). This argument was a staple of late nineteenth-century popular science and was incorporated by naturalist authors such as Theodore Dreiser. The tale of Hardin Lincoln Hale therefore provides evidence of the popular conceptions of insanity which abounded in turn of the century America and which erupt profusely in Lesy’s book.

Brock’s true family story is concluded with pessimistic anecdotes which also suit the fatalistic tone of Lesy’s American ancestors. We are told that Albert, the love child, committed suicide by shooting himself through the head in 1951, and that Ham’s brother Dennis was stung to death by a cloud of yellow jackets in 1935 (371). It appears that the family was perpetually haunted by a legacy of misery and that under the “cattle and cropland” lies a disturbing history of encumbered, disenchanted and fatefully cursed country folk: an inheritance which may be revealed through oral history and archival remnants.

## 2.2 Film

Harmony Korine's perverse experimental drama, *Gummo* (1997) has been described as a "grim, darkly humorous postmortem on small-town America" (Guthmann). The film received callous criticism for its advertently distressing portrait of Ohioan citizens and its antagonizing shock value; therefore, it seems the perfect portrait of spiritual bankruptcy directed by a contemporary degenerate. The film was also criticized for its condescendingly stylistic composition, suggesting its iconic and figuratively fashionable status rather than its accessibility. Korine depicts an "ultrachaotic environment" with "images coming in from all directions" which belies a sense of community (Herzog & Korine). The film follows two poverty-stricken teenagers, Solomon and Tumbler, through an eccentric tour of their scandalous occupations and demoralizing daily routines, juxtaposed with "postcards from hell" of the other local residents of Xenia, Ohio (Anderson, "Seamy Snapshots").<sup>11</sup> Like Lesy's fragmentary documents, these video shorts seem to be authenticated by our contemporary therapeutic culture which privileges an exorbitant mixture of the Springer-esque talk show and reality television to define the mental climate of America. Similarities to the style and timbre of *Wisconsin Death Trip* become strikingly apparent as the visual text is said by journalist Edward Guthmann to mix "the rawness of documentary and the hyper-reality of a dream or an acid trip," and is paralleled, again, with the work of Diane Arbus, which includes triplets, giants, estranged couples, masked women and portraits which intensify anomalous facial features, and also by the work of David Lynch such as the revelation of "festering rot" in *Blue Velvet* (1986). The

charge is made that cohesion is utterly devoid from the text in terms of stylistic unity, narrative structure, and character relationships. One journalist details that “When Tod Browning made *Freaks* back in 1932, the point was that community exists even among the most Godforsaken of creatures” (Anderson “Seamy Snapshots”). In *Gummo*, the seemingly distorted funhouse figures appear alienated even from themselves. The film is saturated with an air of despondency which seems to be a key term for the mental anguish of failure and unmaterialized dreams in the genre of Midwestern Gothic.

The film depicts the skeletal wreck of the town of Xenia after a great tornado hit and devastated the settlement. The tornado represented the strewn hopes of the townspeople as “houses were split open and you could see necklaces hanging from branches of trees” (*Gummo*). We are told in the hushed and whispered voice of Solomon that the tornado killed people “left and right,” leading to the refrain that “People die in Xenia.” Indeed, the town hones in on death, from the discussion of lost and buried parents, to multiple discussions of suicide and finally to the boys’ discovery of a catatonic grandmother, hooked to a life support machine and putrefying in her own waste, whom they believe to have been dead her whole life. The family portraits hung in one Xenia living room do not represent exuberant life and memories of success, but are merely tools to prevent a host of flies in the cavity of the house from seeping into the house. The tornado thus signifies the onslaught of destruction and decay pervading the remainder of the film.

One wonders if the title *Gummo* is ironically derived from the name from the name of the star that played Dorothy in MGM's 1939 fantasy classic *The Wizard of Oz*. Featuring a tornado that whisked a young Dorothy Gale into the Technicolor land of Oz on a spiritual quest to find the Emerald city, the protagonist was played by Judy Garland whose actual name is Frances Ethel Gumm.<sup>12</sup> This 1997 film, however, reveals that the coming of age quest does not lead to the realization of dreams, wisdom, courage and bravery, nor to a path paved with gold and greenbacks. *Gummo* represents the obverse of L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* which "aspire[d] to being a modernized fairy tale, in which the wonderment and joy are retained and the heart-aches and nightmares are left out" (qtd. in Dighe 42). It does, however, suggest that there is "no place like home;" as home is represented as a negative space and a menagerie of rancor, eccentric behavior, and hidden secrets in which the perverseness of childhood and its insecurities may flourish. The characters do not follow a road to progress nor infinite possibility, but are harbored in a mire of paucity and detritus. An initial character, a young boy dressed in nothing but shorts and bunny ears, is depicted on an overpass suspended above the road, sitting and playing on concrete strewn with refuse, and his own spit and piss, underneath a murky sky laden with rain. This suggests that the possibility to journey beyond these social, economic and mental limitations is impeded.

Many of the short excerpts which depict a documentary flourish reflect the frustration of the thwarted characters in *Wisconsin Death Trip*. These detail the rape and sexual assault of a young girl, two brothers who murdered their parents

in an apparent striving for power, a set of identical twins who died in 1983, a cocaine addict, and a man who claims that suicide is the only way out of the blue collar race. Tumbler makes his own home videos which depict him, against a background of bad techno music, declaring his dissatisfaction with life; "Dear world, I think it was a mistake I was ever born, I've had jobs since I was 13 years old ... the problem is all I see is misery and darkness." We learn that his employment, however, consists of killing cats to supply meat for the local grocery store.

This dissatisfaction is heightened against the intimated background of a cult of celebrity and a cult of masculinity. Solomon's tap-dancing mother wishes to be Marlene Dietrich, an albino woman makes a dating tape professing her love for Patrick Swayze, and a young girl repeatedly cries "I want a moustache dammit" so that she can be Burt Reynolds. One of the closing scenes depicts the bleach blonde-haired sisters Dot and Darby, frolicking in a swimming pool to the sound of Roy Orbison's "Crying." However, this one seeming scene of luxury takes place in the shadow of a power plant, suggesting the hard labor of the manufacturing industry and its contemporary decline and concomitant loss of employment. The males in the film seem chided with emasculation, from a boy whose birth was accompanied by a lesbian midwife and had to suffer the rage of his mother's early menopausal symptoms, to Solomon, whose overbearing mother puts a gun to head exclaiming, "Hey you son of a bitch, if you don't smile I will kill you" and who makes him spaghetti to eat in the bathtub while she washes his imp-like head. The paramount scene of masculine disavowal occurs when a



group of men, including Tummler's father, sit around a kitchen bare-chested and wrestle with a table and chair in order to prove their domination and control of some household object. The threat of emasculation reflects one excerpt from the Mendota State Asylum in *Wisconsin Death Trip* which reads, "Always talking about being 'put down,' 'undermined,' and abused by his brothers ... Thinks he has loss of Manhood." This motif of frustrated manhood is particularly poignant in *Gummo*, as at least three men contemplate suicide and two find a way out to the big city and its promise of fame and fortune by becoming transvestites.

The presence and metaphorical value of disease which are so prevalent in Lesy's text are also rife in *Gummo*. The epidemics of tuberculosis, smallpox and diphtheria, however, are replaced by modern diseases as, for example, before Solomon's father died, he "had a bad case of the diabetes" and the object of Dot and Darby's affections, one tennis playing, mullet adorned stud, is afflicted with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). In an early scene, Tummler discovers a lump in his girlfriend's breast. Later in the film her family visit her in the hospital as she is preparing for surgery to remove the cancer and she confides that this will only increase her isolation and distance from the other members of the town. The presence of disease heightens the residents of Xenia's sense of affliction and metaphorically represents the infection of the body politic, its degeneration and its nervous and restless desire to be recognized.

The text is disturbed by two foundational incidents, however, which reveal the original investment in an American Dream, or America as Idea. In one scene, two young boys are dressed as cowboys with hat, boots, belt and toy gun. They police

a junkyard in an advertently aggressive and hostile manner, “killing” the poverty stricken rabbit that represents to them a “queer” ideology. In another abrupt and disjunctive scene, the voice of Tumbler recites, “Without wood there’d be no America, no ship to bring the Pilgrims across the ocean, no log cabins, no schoolhouse, no churches, no covered wagons, no railroad ties, no cigar store Indians, no nothing.” Here Tumbler ruminates on primitive origins and iconographic lore, perhaps attempting to transfigure a linear narrative of his own peculiar position. It seems glaringly evident that the aspirations of the pioneers contrast sharply to the despondent attitude of Tumbler and Solomon, who reel against a façade of happiness, of “life” and “home.”

Michael and Mark Polish’s *Northfork* (2003) places a strong thematic investment in death. The film charts the birth and death of a small Montana town in the name of progress. The film opens with Viewmaster footage of pictures which would easily tessellate with the grand and optimistic images in Lesy’s *Dreamland*. Black and white images of dam construction, railroad cars, blasting, the glorification of male labor and a stilted portrait of the Indian community in the region demonstrate the conclusive archived images of the dying town. These sanguine representations are juxtaposed with the barrenness of Northfork as the black suited Evacuation Committee ensures the departure of the residents in order to prepare for the construction of a dam whose waters will inundate the town.

In the desolate and austere town, the Polish brothers focus their story around two characters who each reveal a particular perspective upon death. Irwin, an orphaned child, spends his final days languishing in the orphanage until his death

converges with the obliteration of Northfork. Walter, a member of the Evacuation Committee, must also come to terms with the death of his wife, whose body he must exhume from the cemetery before the flood. One of the initial images in the film displays a coffin surfacing in a large body of water displaying the town's deep seated anxieties about the death of children, adults and the community alike.

Irwin's story attempts to locate him in the sentimental rubric which has always enveloped the death of a child. An obituary from *Wisconsin Death Trip* exemplifies the rhetoric which is fundamental to Irwin's story; "He started home long ago and has been waiting outside for weary months.... He left his suffering and weakness all this side the gate.... His father sat by him in the closing hours, yet heard not the flutter of angel wings as they came so gently and bore his dear one away." The rhetorical tactics employed by Father Harlan, who sits by the orphan's bedside, seem to suggest to the boy that he is, in fact, an angel, and in dream-like sequences which project the boy's death, Irwin journeys through a graveyard coming to stop at the residence of three eccentric angels. Cast from the paraphernalia which lies at the dying boy's bedside, Cod, Happy, Flower Hercules and Cup of Tea put the child through rigorous tests to discern if he is the lost angel they have been seeking. These angels hold the key to Irwin's seemingly purgatorial position in Northfork, as they own a painting which depicts an unconventional recital of frontier mythology. In the painting, a flock of angels are hunted down by a lasso wielding cowboy on an overbearing steed. This unhallowed genocide suggests that with the progressive movement westward, innocence was destroyed and only the sinister side of life remained.

The film is shot with a heavy emphasis on grayscale, and many of the scenes appear bleached and waning. This is particularly evident in a shot of the American flag which is conceived in grey and black tones. The use of grayscale enhances the pessimistic tone of the movie, but also demonstrates how American ideals have been subverted. These settlers have become impoverished in the name of capital and big business, homes have been literally divided or lost, and the people have become alienated from the land. The Polish brothers' picture of modernization from 1955 seems to parallel the 1890 portrait of the Wisconsin countryside as a place of dry bones. The film is also laden with local eccentrics who seem to hold onto grotesque truths. For example, one man has built himself an ark, complete with two wives, in order to save himself from the march of progress. Another fanatic hammers large iron nails through his feet in order to anchor himself to his cherished perception of home. *Northfork* offers a portrait of a dying town which appears to subvert traditional values as Lesy does, exploiting the paradigm of perverse nostalgia. This film offers fantastical characters, grotesque figures, dream sequences, and competing snapshots of the American landscape providing a postmodern "fragmentary history that [farmers and ranchers] understand" (Polish).

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The texts discussed in this chapter thus serve to provide an example of the Midwestern Gothic genre. These eccentric and often incoherent texts represent "A disorder like that of [Alwyn's] grandmother Duff's unbalanced mind: memories, inverted ideas, many-voiced wandering symmetrical discords, the

entire material of three-quarters of a century's experience rewoven more briefly in a deafening fugue" (Wescott 292). This paradigm of the ancestor and youthful counterpart, particularly represented as a male/ female dichotomy, suggests thematic unity within these Midwestern texts. As Alwyn relates, "*The whole country had one symbol: a very young man, always at the beginning of a career, always beside his mother ... He would never forget that when she had been at his side, the mirage had seemed real and not far away; he would never again be so happy as he had been, under her spell*" (Wescott 25). A sense of optimism may still be cultivated in a youthful figure; however, adolescence brings with it trials and tribulations which reveal the sour nature of the 'virgin land.' In *Winesburg, Ohio*, Elizabeth Willard hopes that her son will not reach the same bitter end she achieves; "In the boyish figure she yearned to see something half forgotten that had once been a part of herself re-created. The prayer concerned that. "Even though I die, I will in some way keep defeat from you"" (22). She ruminates, "Within him there is a secret something that is striving to grow. It is the thing I let be killed in myself" (25). This "thing" may refer to a sense of hopeful optimism which was soon lost with maturity. Alwyn's depiction of his ancestors also notes "the waste, wreckage, or abandonment of gifts amid which youth is turned into maturity," and conclusively Wisconsin is depicted as a grandmother with "resistance, ... abandon and spiteful changes of heart" (Wescott 175, 290). In *Gummo*, Solomon and Tumbler express their only tender affection toward a grandmother on a life support machine. Approaching her in clown masks which connote their immaturity, Tumbler strokes her hair and then pulls the plug on the

machine, cutting off her oxygen supply. This murder is carried out with compassion, however, as the boys seem to realize that her long, aging life has only brought despair. The children must rid themselves of the threat of maturity which seemingly brings toil and “no reward.” As Lesy explains:

The people who left the land came to cities ... not to be masters but to be charges. They followed yellow brick roads to emerald cities presided over by imaginary wizards who would permit them to live in happy adolescence for the rest of their lives. By leaving the land, they disavowed a certain kind of adulthood whose mature rewards they understood to be confusion and bereavement. By going to emerald cities, they chose a certain kind of adolescence forever free from frailty, responsibility and death. (*Wisconsin*)

The texts parallel Harry Levin’s assertion that “Most American novels are parables,” representing “a timeless and unlocated psychomania” (17). The characters are haunted by the threat of maturity and humility, and the American experience becomes increasingly destabilized as we are introduced to mentally or pecuniary impoverished characters who fail to experience the master narrative of American life. We are presented with an almost schizophrenic rhythm which reveals the aspiration for, and repeal of, the prevailing ideology. This is evident in a poem by Sherwood Anderson:

We were the heavy ones, heavy and sure.  
The wind in the cornfields moved us not.  
We the Americans, worthy and sure,  
Worthy and sure of ourselves.

Tom killed his brother on Wednesday night,  
Back of the corncrib, under the hill. (qtd. in Sutton 419-20)

These characters represent an antonym of success, delving into abyssal truths which reveal “A patrimony, an unearned inheritance, of knowledge of life, of skeletons in the closet” (Wescott 292). From the spectral archive repressed ghosts come to the fore, much like those who haunt George Willard’s rural fair. These

texts portray a life which is indeed both passionate and senseless, claustrophobic, greedy, and exhausting, like a great county fair:

A village of rickety buildings inclosed by a fence too high to climb; a narrow entrance, a narrow exit. A multitude of laughing or irritable people dragging awe-stricken children by one hand. Many spoiling their appetites with the unwholesome refreshments that are for sale – some of these hiding afterward because they are sick. Some stingy, some extravagant, nearly everyone wanting to be more prosperously dressed; everyone tired to death. Women indignant at the neglect of their men; little ones whimpering because their mothers are out of sight. ... Games of chance – the players always losing, the proprietors always poor. Eager or scandalized blushes in the tents where there is nakedness to be seen ... Shouting around the pits in which human anomalies and sick wild animals are exhibited ... jugglers ... seeming to find the loud applause inadequate. (Wescott 115)

We are presented with the death of idealism and the realization of the dearth of life.

## Conclusion

The book that would be fashionable must, above all, be obscure.  
Max Nordau, *Degeneration*.

Midwestern gothic depicts the particular psychic and social attributes of a region that failed to provide many with the cultural rewards promised by the mythology of the rural idyll and the Old Republican ideal of a Jeffersonian ideology, Manifest Destiny, and Turner's heady Frontier Thesis. This mode registers the *unheimlich* contradictions inherent in national mythology, exhibiting the return of repressed or secret knowledge illuminating failure, disillusionment and demise, the obverse of the American Dream. It is as Hamlin Garland wrote in "Up the Coulee," "I've come to the conclusion that life is a failure for ninety-nine percent of us. You can't help me now. It's too late" (qtd. in Watts 207). As cultural critic Edward Watts suggests, "There will be no happy ending: no reparation, no atonement or even a cathartic death" (207). Midwestern Gothic acknowledges the pecuniary historical trauma which affected farmers, ranchers and blue-collar workers, and deals with the specific hardships of those who live in the 'frost belt' and who suffer from the dislocation wrought by harsh natural conditions. Indeed, in his sociological conclusion, Lesy notes of the late nineteenth century that the rural inhabitants, "suffered from undervitalization as well as a lack of sanitation, and were often driven mad by the morbid states that inevitably arose from the economic overcrowding they now experienced on the deserted frontier. Even the itinerant farmhands who managed to find work and avoid the madness were crippled by a vicious cycle of boredom and immorality"



(*Wisconsin*). In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault also notes a moral economy which was linked to insanity:

A class of society that lives in disorder, in negligence, and almost in illegality: If on the one hand we see families prosper for a long series of years in the bosom of harmony and order and concord, how many others, especially in the lower classes, afflict the eye with a repulsive spectacle of debauchery, of dissensions, and shameful distress! That, according to my daily notes, is the most fertile source of the insanity we treat in the hospitals. ... In the classical period, indigence, laziness, vice, and madness mingled in an equal guilt within unreason; madmen were caught in the great confinement of poverty and unemployment, but all had been promoted, in the proximity of transgression, to the essence of a Fall. Now madness belonged to social failure, which appeared without distinction as its cause, model, and limit. (259).

The wholesome values with which the Midwest is honored -- including a Puritanical work ethic, familial cohesion, and veneration of the home -- are reevaluated. Midwestern Gothic registers the particular isolation of those who have become detached from families, communities, even oneself, as each individual applies an introspective psychological examination, judging him or herself against an ideological yardstick. The individual finally becomes alienated from the land which had promised to sustain him, resulting in "that loneliness which could once evoke Nigger Jim's chant of praise to the Mississippi pastoral but which here has become fearful and sour" (Howe 98). The Midwestern Gothic therefore renders an archival or mnemonic eulogy to atrophied figures, presenting a malignant dialectic which challenges prevailing images of affirmation.

The Midwest appears to occupy a liminal space between the influential triangular apices of the United States, situated between Eastern sophistication, civilization, and the decadence of governmental, historical and fiscal superiority, and Western health, vigor and bravado. The area is also infected by the culture of

the Southern States, as often the violence which permeates the texts originates from the South, such as the Kentuckian murderer in *Indiana Gothic* and the crowing presence of a Confederate flag in *Gummo*. The region of the Middle West also faces the psychic challenge of a marginal identity which schizophrenically attempts to incorporate conflicting ideals.

In *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (1957), Richard Chase declared that a contradiction between radically opposed forces lay at the heart of American literature. French novelist and philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre also claimed that Americans tend to suffer from “an ambivalence of anguish” (qtd. in Levin 6). The ambivalence between success and failure, abundance and depletion is evident in these Midwestern texts and is particularly emphatic in James Marsh’s rendering of *Wisconsin Death Trip* (1999). During the opening scenes of the film the deadpan narrator, played by Ian Holm, speaks of the “Great continent” of America and the “desirable residence” of Wisconsin. Affirmative proclamations are then contradicted by the scenes of suicide, murder, arson, vigilante justice and the terrorizing shadow of a cocaine-snorting, window smashing woman. Marsh’s more co-opted take on Lesy’s book also retains the mythic symbols of America in his juxtaposing scenes of contemporary Wisconsin which depict childlike innocence and the concluding vision of an American Flag. The overriding force of national mythology is difficult to challenge, thus suggesting the aberrant nature of these alternative and historically traumatic texts. The difficulty of challenging mythic optimism corresponds to Ohioan Judge Timothy Walker’s address before

the Ohio Historical and Philosophical Society in Columbus, 1837 whereby he stated:

I can well remember when, in Massachusetts, the rage for moving to Ohio was so great, that resort was had to counteracting fictions, in order to discourage it; and this region was represented as cold, sterile, sickly, and full of all sorts of monsters. ... I have a distinct recollection of a picture, which I saw in boyhood, prefixed to a penny, anti-moving to Ohio pamphlet, in which a stout, ruddy, well-dressed man, on a sleek, fat horse, with a label, "I am going to Ohio," meets a pale, and ghastly skeleton of a man, scarcely half dressed, on the wreck of what was once a horse ... with a label, "I have been to Ohio." But neither falsehood nor ridicule could deter the enterprising from seeking a new home. Hither they came in droves. (Anderson, "Old Northwest" 96-7)

In Lesy's *Wisconsin Death Trip* and several other Midwestern texts the underside of this optimistic ideology prevails. Lesy's historical approach, which combines the agenda of the naturalists, the revisionists, and the degenerates, displays the spiritual ailments of both the 1890s and 1970s, exhibiting the pessimism of malaise which was evident in both time periods. He must respond to Jack London's assertion of displeasure in *The Kempton Wace Letters* (1903):

I, overcivilized, decadent dreamer that I am, rejoice that the past binds us, am proud of a history so old and so significant and of a heritage so marvelous .... You are suffering from, what has been called, the sadness of science.... You discover that romance has a history, and lo' romance has vanished! You are a werther of science, sad to the heart with a melancholy all your own and dropping inert tears on the shrine of your accumulated facts.... (qtd. in Lutz 277)

Lesy's "accumulated facts" indeed reveal the façade of romance, much as Hamlin Garland's 1903 diaries depicting Iowa disclose disenchantment with his former rural vision. On May 26, 1903, he declared that the people seemed "uncouth" and "dirty." He stated "The old people of the town depress me. In an unexpected phase of western life the small town has become in a certain sense the hospital home into which farmers and their wives, old and gray, drift to wear out a few

short years of decrepitude” (qtd. in Lutz 118). In a regretful manner he claims, “All this common placeness ... cuts me off from the past – or rather it separates me from these people and scenes.... My old-time world, the world that appealed to my imagination is gone – This flat, stale and unprofitable world inhabited by melancholy ghosts of the past was a sad surprise” (qtd. in Lutz 188). In a similar vein, Lesy reveals the reality of rural life, chastising the imaginative perception of the “Platonists who believed America to be an idea” (*Wisconsin*).

Lesy challenges the idealistic concept of the Midwest, which is tinged with nostalgic reverie. As described by Paul Grainge, “Theoretically, nostalgia is understood as a socio-cultural response to forms of discontinuity, claiming a vision of stability and authenticity in some conceptual “golden age”” (21). Lesy, however, highlights periods of historical rupture which belie an optimistic ideology. He provides a dialectic access to the past which negotiates symbolic truths.

His memory practice is caustic and perverse. He belongs to a tradition of abject Midwestern archivists who reveal the hidden spaces of a historical trajectory. Lesy presents grotesque relics of the past who, like the characters in *Winesburg, Ohio*, are, “Stripped of their animate wholeness and twisted into frozen postures of defense” (Howe 99). Both visual and written texts imply a hue of anthropomorphic taxidermy as Alwyn Tower acknowledges in *The Grandmothers*:

He might try to write something about [his relatives].... It occurred to him discouragingly that he would then be doing no more than his father did with birds and animals: Spreading out and cleaning the bones (the drier, the better they would keep); choosing a single attitude for each one and wiring it as firmly as possible; arranging them in groups as lifelike as

groups of lifeless bodies could be. His father also gave them glass eyes, and painted their mouths and claws; the paint faded. But then, so did living colors-on beak and claw, and human face as well. (283)

The relationship between death, taxidermy, and the violence of history and historical representation is acknowledged by Lesy as he includes an excerpt by Wescott concerning taxidermy in *Wisconsin Death Trip*:

Alwyn invariably felt sick when he went into the room at one end of the house which was his [father's] workshop. Bodies of birds and small animals bleeding slowly on newspapers, while his father imitated them with wire, tow, string, and wet clay; the pelts drying on wooden forms and the bird skins turned inside out, and dusted with cornmeal and arsenic; scraping knives in the skulls of deer, the odor of stale meat and green bone.

The interruption of this commentary links historical investigation and the “death drive” of the archive. Not only does it relate to the repellent facts one may discover about familial or national history, but it also relates to the tone of the artifacts as well. One eerie photograph depicts two young boys, their images refracted and interspersed with a trophy deer head which reflects their own somber and stilted attitude. Barthes provides an explanation of the anthropological place of Death, expounding, “Death must be somewhere in society; if it is no longer (or less intensely) in religion, it must be elsewhere; perhaps in this image which produces Death while trying to preserve life” (92). He continues, “Contemporary with the withdrawal of rites, Photography may correspond to the intrusion, in our modern society, of an asymbolic Death, outside of religion, outside of ritual, a kind of abrupt dive into literal Death” (92). What photography, like taxidermy, reveals is not unmitigated access to a living entity but a tomb or a corpse of a once breathing socially and culturally informed subject. The artifact of funereal immobility reveals a momentary sliver of time

which is now lost or “dead” to us. Historical artifacts and fragmentary memories therefore become cadavers – the ultimate in the realm of abject horror.<sup>13</sup>

As an abject text, *Wisconsin Death Trip* may be read as a work of the Neo Avant-Garde. In her work *Recycled Culture in Contemporary Film and Art*, Vera Dika states that:

Calcified images and old generic elements have formed possible points of resistance through a system of displacements and disruptions. Used as codes, these elements have engendered an internal friction between past and present, between old images and new narratives, and between representation and the real. Instead of diminishing our ability to picture our historical moment, this method has often encouraged confrontations with the present through the rupture of representational surfaces. (224)

The “calcified images” of Lesy’s text, such as the pictures of rigid girls who look as if they are covered with the creep of frost, do form a series of disruptions in the national narrative, as the code of faces and hands and the morse-like staccato of records and extracts challenge the representation of the rural region and psychic security of the Mid West. They register a historical trauma similar to that of the decaying farmhouse, manic slaughterhouse, and withered landscape of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, released one year after Lesy’s book in 1974, and deriving influence from the Plainsfield, Wisconsin serial killer Ed Gein. As Dika explains, “The whole epidermis of the film has been presented as somehow festering with dis-ease” (76). Like Lesy’s documentary effort, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* also demonstrates a “faux realism” composed of “a grainy, repulsive visual surface depicting deteriorating locations and people” (Dika 73). As Lesy’s book also intimates, the film registered the despondency of the 1970s due to the Vietnam War and the socio-political disruptions resulting in loss and despair. This film also evinced a sense of the apocalyptic which gained urgency in the

1970s and may also inform *Wisconsin Death Trip*. The apocalyptic in 1970s literature and film encompassed, according to Christopher Sharret, "The unrecuperability of society, with the dissolution and futility of all human effort" (qtd. in Williams 184). It also represented a "pathological reaction toward the viewer's negative self-image within a historical situation seemingly impervious to progressive change" (Williams 185). This parallels the aberrant introspection which characterized the town of Black River Falls as it experienced turmoil and strife for over a decade. In this literature and film, much as in the Midwestern Gothic texts studied, the literary convention whereby "dark families threaten younger generations" is strikingly evident (Williams 185).

*The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* was linked with the historical avant-garde of the surrealists and the second neo-avant-garde of the postmodern artists due to its incriminating onslaught of the waning of affect, and was purchased by the Museum of Modern Art as part of its permanent collection (Dika 69). *Wisconsin Death Trip* may also be aligned with avant-garde work as it is associated with repetition and return, and temporality and textuality which are "the twin obsessions of the neo-avant-gardes" (Foster 32). Cultural critic Hal Foster claims that "the theoretical elaboration of museological temporality and cultural intertextuality" are hallmarks of the avant-garde (32). Temporality and intertextuality are foundational to Lesy's archival work which assimilates sources from visual and written sources, polyvalent voices, and cultural critique that contextualizes both a nineteenth and twentieth century social, economic, and political framework. Lesy's distressing historical portrait also registers the

schema of avant-garde work which “is never historically effective or fully significant in its initial moments. It cannot be because it is traumatic – a hole in the symbolic order of its time that is not prepared for it, that cannot receive it, at least not immediately” (Foster 29). With at least thirty years distance, the increasingly candid notion of historical discontent, and the established discourses of revisionism and postmodernism, we may distinguish the cultural merits of *Wisconsin Death Trip*.

As well as locating *Wisconsin Death Trip* in an elite cultural context, it may also be considered alongside sensational and satirical discourses which deny its purportedly prosaic nature. The prevalence of the sensational press is evident in *Indiana Gothic* whereby Marguerite, Link’s daughter, liked to read selections from the daily paper aloud, including such tidbits as “Lumberjack Dislocates Jaw Yawning,” “Maniac Conducts Prayer Meeting,” “Four Sisters Are Insane,” and “DRIVEN INSANE BY CIGARETTES” (102, 161, 162). During Link’s trial, psychiatrist Dr. Upchurch contends, “You see, public sympathy with these cases depends upon the dramatic skill with which the husband, and the agents acting in his behalf, present his story. He has to appeal to the degenerate tastes of the public” (292). He laments, “Unfortunately Americans are fast becoming pigs at the trough of popular entertainment – that is to say, lurid books, magazines, moving pictures – an appetite which is fed every day by the depraved tone of the public press” (292). Lesy’s documents may reflect this trend. Indeed, “Poe once wrote that the rise of the sensational penny newspapers in the early 1830’s had an influence upon American life and letters that was probably beyond all



calculation” (Reynolds 171). Literary critic David Reynolds agrees with this statement asserting, “[Poe] was right: it is impossible to measure precisely the effects of a journalistic revolution that had a lasting impact upon all aspects of America’s cultural life” (171). In the 1880’s a visiting British woman named Emily Faithfull declared that “the American newspaper very often startles its more cultured readers with extraordinary sensational headings and the prominence it gives to horrors of all kinds – murders, elopements, divorces, and wickedness in general” (Reynolds 172). In *Wisconsin Death Trip*, sensationalism is evident in the accounts of suicide, assault, and murder of family members. One such example exclaims:

Middle Ridge ... was the scene of the most terrible crime ever committed in La Crosse County. Edmund Ott, while temporarily insane and fearing death at the hands of an imaginary mob, sought to put his wife and baby out of the way of desperadoes he thought were about to hang him. He shot and killed his 3 year old daughter. He shot his wife twice, but she will recover. He then killed himself. The gunshot set fire to Ott’s clothing and also to the house. His body was burnt to a crisp and the house destroyed.

This excerpt is presented alongside tales of sea creatures, werewolves, “a reptile about 40ft. long in the water,” and men who consume bedsprings. The book may thus illustrate the tradition which began in 1830s newspapers such as the New York *Morning Post*, the New York *Sun*, the Boston *Daily Times*, and James Gordon Bennett’s *New York Herald*, and related criminal and trial pamphlets. It corresponds to the appetite for “horror, gore, and perversity” amongst the early reading public (Reynolds 171).

*Wisconsin Death Trip* also relates to the satirical inflection of Mark Twain or gothic naturalist Ambrose Bierce’s work. In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

(1885), Twain portrays the American obsession with death and violence which disrupts the pastoral, sanguine and innocent idyll. He depicts a morbid obsession with funereal culture, depicting a young girl who:

[K]ept a scrapbook ... and used to paste obituaries and accidents and cases of patient suffering ... Every time a man died, or a woman died, or a child died, she would be on hand with her "tribute" before he was cold.... Everyone was sorry she died, because she had laid out a lot more of those pictures to do.... With her disposition she was having a better time in the graveyard. (qtd. in Ruby 121)

Literary critic Leslie Fiedler also points out the irony inherent in the popular and acclaimed "children's" novel which focused on violence; "that euphoric boys' book, begins with its protagonist holding off at gun point his father half driven mad by the D.T.'s and ends (after a lynching, a disinterment, and a series of violent deaths relieved by such humorous incidents as soaking a dog with kerosene and setting him afire) with the revelation of that father's sordid death" (215). This demonstrates the jouissance of sordid knowledge whilst exposing the contradictory nature of America's bouyant ideology.

Journalist Ambrose Bierce, an opponent of the dire life of rural Ohio, also wrote macabre satirical extracts in the late nineteenth century. One, for example, read, "Last week was the best week for dead babies we ever had. Of the seventy-four deaths occurring in the city, more than half were of infants under two years of age. Thirty were under one year. Whom the gods love die young, particularly if their parents get drunk and neglect them" (qtd. in Hopkins 3). He also wrote excerpts on suicide entitled "San Francisco's Advantages For Suicide" (1877), "Where Ratsbane Didn't Succeed" (1869), and "Suicide As an Art" (1869). One article read, "Linton cut his wind-pipe completely off with a very dull chisel

because he could not get work. He immediately obtained all the work he wanted: he had to work very hard to breathe" (qtd. in Morris xvi). Bierce expresses a deep cynicism with life stemming from his early Midwestern misery, and his voice seemingly operates as a silent subtext in Lesy's book. These misanthropic authors therefore attest to the prevalence of a subterranean misery and cynicism lurking in the landscape, acknowledging the contradictions which abound in the American psyche.

*Wisconsin Death Trip* also encourages the reappraisal of, not only little known authors, but also historical events and individuals which would hitherto be neglected in a hegemonic narrative. Those on the fringes of society, or those who compose an intimate, personal account, may be given greater significance, especially when considering economic, social and cultural history. Taking the Midwestern state of Michigan, for example, one may discover such characters as Andrew Kehoe, who performed one of the first terrorist attacks in the United States on a schoolhouse in Bath. Like the individuals who populate Lesy's book, Kehoe also seemed to suffer from obsessive-compulsive disorder, or a devout belief in purity. One historian explains, "Andrew was habitually neat and his sanitary habits were well known. He often changed his shirt in mid-day or whenever the slightest hint of dirt appeared on his shirt. Anyone who ever worked with him knew that if Andrew got dirty, he would immediately clean up and emerge from the washroom neat as a pin. He was meticulous in his dress and manner" (Gado "Hell Comes to Bath"). He also had a reputation for thriftiness. In the early 1920s he feared losing his farm and plunging into debt, and protested

against high taxes. He targeted the schoolhouse as a source of his anxiety and imminent economic misfortune. During 1926 he became insane, purchasing Pyrotol which he planned to use in an arson attack. The repeated explosions on his property lead the community to believe he was a dynamite farmer. Indeed, he received an early contract from DuPont. In 1927 he began an intricate wiring system in the Bath Consolidated School and wired his home in the same manner. On May 17, he killed his wife, Nellie, and set fire to the farm and on May 18 he blew up the school, killing forty-two. Kehoe's final words, approximating a naturalistic refrain, were "Criminals are made, not born." This incident attests to the presence of an "American Nightmare" and also provides further evidence of those who suffered crises of psychic stability, masculinity and economic trepidation.

Another individual to consider would be tourist attraction "Rock the Hermit." Born in Poland in 1846, Rock was an immigrant who, according to one account, accidentally killed a student in Alpena, Michigan. Following this incident, he imposed the hermit lifestyle upon himself as a penance. As historian Chris Miller explains, even though he was a hermit, Rock ended up posing for a variety of photographs which were made into postcards during the first two decades of the twentieth century (105). He was then admitted to the Traverse City State Hospital, formerly Northern Michigan Asylum, in 1919. Whether posing for monetary gain or community recognition, "Rock the Hermit" was acknowledged and served as a source of fascination for the local populace.

Family history may also provide a source of archival and historically disruptive information. Personal research conducted with the Michigan State University Museum has led to the discovery of an intricate and captivating history. Mr. Rowe of Chicora, Michigan retains many anecdotes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century which would fit into the annals of a history like *Wisconsin Death Trip*. For example, his Grandfather owned a three-legged bull which was sold to buy his burial suit, and his Grandmother Phoebe Bell was declared insane after the birth of his father, Frank, a fact which was unknown until Mr. Rowe discovered it in an old newspaper article. Her insanity could be attributed to what is now known as postnatal depression. In the 1920's, his ancestors belonged to the revival Ku Klux Klan movement, which was predominantly an anti-Catholic movement, but was also seen as an association for community entertainment and solidarity.<sup>14</sup> These historical narratives all provide an alternative and unique perspective of Midwestern history.

A further study of *Wisconsin Death Trip* may also reveal a more detailed archival approach. For example, the personal history of the individuals included in the book could be researched, examining census data and considering specific geographical location, occupation, economic status, literacy and by discovering political orientation and whether the individuals belonged to particular social clubs or societies. A broader genealogical study could be approached, including interviews with descendants and their perspective of family inclusion in *Wisconsin Death Trip*. A history of the practices, legislation and intellectual tools used in asylums or sanatoriums could be developed. The book could particularly

benefit from a study of masculine and feminine identity within its pages. There appears to be fertile ground for a study of these concepts, and this could be related to the evolution of these roles at the turn of the century. One could also consider the practice of Victorian grotesque taxidermy or the particular methods of photography and photographic preservation which relate directly to the visual images. A greater explication of the historical context, particularly the Panic of 1893 to 1897 and the events in the 1970s which culminated in the "Farm Crisis," could also be developed. Furthermore, *Wisconsin Death Trip* could be read specifically alongside naturalist texts or postmodern literary historical and mythological works. Other interdisciplinary works to be considered in the genre of Midwestern Gothic may include Ambrose Bierce's Ohio short stories; Jane Smiley's novel *A Thousand Acres* (1992) which deals with battery and incest on a thousand acre farm in Zebulon County, Iowa; director Richard Pearce's film *Country* (1984), dealing with the financial failure of a farm; Maxwell Mackenzie's interdisciplinary project *American Ruins: Ghosts on the Landscape* (2001) which juxtaposes rural architecture with quotations from Willa Cather, Johnathan Raban, Trade Journals and historical pieces such as Annette Atkins' *Harvest of Grief: Grasshopper Plagues and Public Assistance in Minnesota, 1872-7*; and Grant Wood's painting "Death on the Ridge Road, 1935."

It is important to note that the shock and anxiety registered in *Wisconsin Death Trip* are also repeated in the contemporary period. As Alvin Toffler explains, "We ... face the chaos of future shock, a free fall into confusion and disorientation as the temporal process outpaces our every step" (qtd. in Hoeveler

5). Lesy's explication of the 1890s could also be repeated for our own generation in future years to come, especially as society becomes more alienated with technological advancement. Lesy provides a new historical method which shapes a direction for the twentieth century historian. Indeed, the postmodern anthropologist attempts to evoke a multiplicity of meanings and to be "discursive rather than definitive" (David 209). The work of postmodern ethnography "aspires to be evocative rather than analytic, fragmentary rather than complete, authored rather than condescending, and allegorical rather than representational" (David 209). This resists the hegemonic creation of mythology or ideology, and allows for a multitude of voices and interpretations which aspire toward to legitimacy and accuracy.

Lesy's brash rendering of the past which reveals a perverse reality of the Midwestern experience attests to Bathes' exclamation referring to nineteenth-century photography; "whoever looks you in the eye is mad" (113). As a haphazard and traumatic text, *Wisconsin Death Trip* certainly ruptures mythic structures and allows us to consider the social, economic and cultural attributes of our heritage:

Through madness, a work that seems to drown in the world, to reveal there its non-sense, and to transfigure itself with the features of pathology alone, actually engages within itself the world's time, masters it, and leads it; by the madness which interrupts it, a work of art opens a void, a moment of silence, a question without answer, provokes a breach without reconciliation where the world is forced to question itself. What is necessarily a profanation in the work of art returns to that point, and in the time of that work swamped in madness, the world is made aware of its guilt. (Foucault 288)

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> For a fuller discussion of neurasthenia and technology see Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1982, and Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983.

<sup>2</sup> Other relevant texts published in the 1970's include Michael Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* (1971), Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock* (1970), and Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (1978).

<sup>3</sup> In *Secure the Shadow*, Jay Ruby states, "I accepted the received wisdom of the time from people like Michael Lesy (1973) that the practice [of postmortem and funeral photography] was virtually nonexistent – a bizarre Victorian custom now confined to a few ethnic enclaves" (3). I find this statement to be unfounded as Lesy emphasizes the conventional nature of the repetitious images of funereal culture.

<sup>4</sup> *Wisconsin Death Trip* could also be compared to histories of law and order. One may consider studies of historical violence such as those written by Robert R. Dykstra or Richard Maxwell Brown.

<sup>5</sup> The figures in *Wisconsin Death Trip* may also represent the trappings of a commodified identity which developed in the late nineteenth century. The realist inventory seems to parallel the emergence of the commercial person. In a review of Hippolyte Taine's *Notes On Paris*, Henry James notes that "His book overflows with the description of material objects ... of face, hair, shoulders and arms, jewels, dresses, and furniture." This is very similar to the objectified nature of Van Shaik's subjects. As Mark Seltzer notes in *Bodies and Machines* (1992) the logistics of representation, including imitation, copying and reproduction, represent the American as artifactual and reproducible and as an aesthetic representation of industrial and market culture (53-56). Lesy's montages which evince the reproduction of bodies, faces and hands seems to parallel this economy of physical capital.

<sup>6</sup> The presence of obsessive-compulsive disorder in *McTeague* has been noted by several critics. See Karen F. Jacobson, "Who's the Boss? *McTeague*, naturalism, and obsessive-compulsive disorder." *Mosaic* 32.2 (June 1999) 27-42. William Freedman, "Oral Passivity and Oral Sadism in Norris's *McTeague*." *Literature and Psychology* 30 (1980): 52-61. Edwin Haviland Miller, "The Art of Frank Norris in *McTeague*." *Markham Review* 8 (1979): 61-65. According to Marie Asberg, "the first comprehensive description was given by Carl Westphal, a professor of psychiatry in Berlin, in a speech to the Berlin Society of Medical Psychology in 1877." Freud first published use of the term obsessional neurosis was probably in his 1895 tract "On the Grounds for Detaching a Particular Syndrome from Neurasthenia under the description Anxiety Neurosis." The term obsession is attributed by psychological historians to Krafft-Ebbing who introduced it in 1897. The relationship between naturalism and OCD may be identified in their stress upon heredity, environment, and unconscious physiological causes. (Jacobson 28-30).

<sup>7</sup> Southern Gothic was a term coined by Ellen Glasgow at the University of Virginia in 1936. It is typically characterized by the grotesque, sexual aberration, cultural inequities of the South, racial and religious fanaticism, the interrogation of southern female archetypes and a fatal patriotism. It is evident in the works of William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Erskine Caldwell, Carson McCullers, Eudora Welty, Tennessee Williams, Harry Crews and Cormac McCarthy. Essays on Western and Southerwestern gothic can also be found in David Mogen, Scott P. Sanders and Joanne B. Karpinski's collection *Frontier Gothic: Terror and Wonder at the Frontier in American Literature*. London & Toronto: Associated University Presses, 2003. James Marsh's documentary of the making of *Wisconsin Death Trip* goes under the title of *Midwestern Gothic*.

<sup>8</sup> See also Susan Kollin, "Race, Labor, and the Gothic Western: Dispelling Frontier Myths in Dorothy Scarborough's *The Wind*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 46.3 (Fall 2000): 675-694.

<sup>9</sup> This motto is interestingly reminiscent of the ironic sign which adorned the gates of the Auschwitz death camp in Nazi Germany which read, "Arbeit Macht Frei" or "Work Makes One Free."



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<sup>10</sup> See David S. Gross, "No Place To Hide: Gothic Naturalism in O. E. Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth*." In *Frontier Gothic: Terror and Wonder at the Frontier in American Literature*.

<sup>11</sup> *Gummo* may also be considered alongside films such as Charles Laughton's *The Night of the Hunter* (1955), Jack Starret's *Race With the Devil* (1975) and Rob Zombie's *House of 1,000 Corpses* (2003). These texts present isolated, small-town settings, macabre incidents, devil worship, ambivalence, commentary on family and the community, and interrogate aesthetic and creative production.

<sup>12</sup> The allegorical intent of *The Wizard of Oz* was noted by Henry Littlefield in a 1964 *American Quarterly* article entitled "The Wizard of Oz: Parable on Populism." This relates to the history of the Midwest as Littlefield asserted that "Baum delineated a Midwesterner's vibrant and ironic portrait of this country as it entered the twentieth century." In this allegory, the yellow brick road represented the gold standard; the scarecrow, a farmer; the brains symbolized the derision farmer's faced as they were chastised as stupid and solely to blame for their economic woes; the tin man, an industrial worker; the Wicked Witch of the East, Wall Street and Big Business; and the Wicked Witch of the West, drought and the malignant forces of nature (Dighe 2). This corresponds to the liminal position of the Midwest and the economic strife which continues to plague certain areas in the twentieth century.

<sup>13</sup> The link between taxidermy, the archive, and Midwestern horror may also be made in reference to notorious Plainfield, Wisconsin serial killer Ed Gein. Gein was considered a polite and reticent rural farmer who exhumed corpses, including that of his mother, and had a rare collection of bodily trophies. In Chuck Parello's *Ed Gein* (2001) a stack of newspapers line every stair and hallway to the bedroom which houses his collection of death masks, shrunken heads and lamps made from human bones and skin, suggesting that he was a collector and hoarder of the most extreme degree. Indeed, on investigation of Gein's farmhouse, the few rooms that weren't nailed off were littered with books, old papers, newspapers and magazines, including history books on Nazi Germany. One of his murdered victims, Bernice Worden, had been disemboweled like a deer. Gein was raised on 160 acre farm with a domineering and devoutly religious mother who had a strong concept of sin. He was kept busy by his mother during his younger years who engaged him in farm work. He was an isolated man who bore a psychological burden of Puritanical education. Gein was the archetype for Robert Bloch and Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*. In the movie, Norman Bates is depicted as a taxidermist, his parlor filled with stuffed birds. He declares, "it's more than a hobby. A hobby's supposed to pass the time not fill it." He also represents the immobility and machinations of fate of the characters in *Wisconsin Death Trip* stating, "You know what I think? I think that – we're all in our private traps – clamped in them. And none of us can ever get out. We – we scratch and we claw, but – only at each other. And for all of it, we never budge an inch. ... I was born in mine."

<sup>14</sup> See archived Ku Klux Klan quilt and project by Charlotte Quinney, Mary Worrall and Marsha Macdowell in the Michigan State University Museum.

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