

ONE STATE / ONE STORY: THE YEAR WE LEFT HOME CAMPUS READ PROGRAM DESCRIPTIONS



BALL STATE UNIVERSITY (MUNCIE)

Project Directors: Andrea Wolfe & Katherine Ludwig

Timeline: Fall 2020 and Spring 2021

Major Activities & Products:

- Two-part course titled *Midwestern Stories*
- Student field trip to The Henry Ford museum in Michigan
- Oral history collection & production of films based on these stories
- Student exhibition on contemporary Midwestern identity at Minnetrista Cultural Center

Faculty at Ball State University will develop a two-course series, *Midwestern Stories*, that will facilitate student investigation of representations of Midwestern identity in various types of media and allow students opportunities to develop their own museum-quality representations of Midwestern identity in response to what they learn.

Midwestern Stories 1: Complicating the Mythic Landscapes of Farm and Factory

Midwestern Stories 1 takes as its starting point the predominant belief in and outside of the Midwest that the region is not what it used to be, that its best days are in the past. Through a series of readings, discussions and experiential learning, students will begin to question and complicate images and storytelling about the Midwest. Studies will visit The Henry Ford to experience and discuss the way in which the museum tells the Midwestern story. Turning to literature with Jean Thompson's *The Year We Left Home* and other texts like Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex*, Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere*, and Angela Jackson's *Where I Must Go* will provide further ground for discussion of Midwestern representation. Together, these novels will demonstrate the preoccupation of contemporary Midwestern writers with the region's past and, perhaps, the drive of these writers to contend with nostalgic representations of the past. Finally, the course will introduce local, remembered stories. As part of its partnership with *Midwestern Stories*, Minnetrista Cultural Center will suggest prominent members of the community who may remember the 1940s-1980s and be willing to share their recollections. Students will produce a film based on these oral histories, which will be shown in the exhibit developed during *Midwestern Stories 2*.

Midwestern Stories 2: Constructing Our Contemporary Identity

The second course will step forward in time, examining the stories told of the contemporary Midwest in media beyond literature, including film and television, as well as advertising, music, newspaper comics, and even cookbooks. According to one view, the Midwest has a particular type of citizen: rural, white, and uneducated. Seldom does the diversity of experiences and cultures available in the Midwest (including Midwestern cities) make its way into mainstream depictions. Students will explore current popular texts like Rust Belt noir, *Parks and Recreation*, and *Stranger Things* in relationship to locally-produced content about the Midwest (murals, city promotional materials, local activist campaigns) to explore who and what influences our contemporary idea of the Midwest. The students' explorations will culminate in an exhibit at Minnetrista, which will display the roots of Midwestern identity and imagery, question the monolithic idea of the Midwest described by media and pop culture, and allow students and visitors to respond to these ideas as a generative ground to imagine the future of the Midwest.

IUPUC (COLUMBUS)

Project Director: Lisa Seifker-Bailey

Timeline: Fall 2020 and Spring 2021

Major Activities & Products:

- Re-design of Reading, Writing & Inquiry course around the theme of Midwestern identity

At IUPUC, the Campus Read grant will provide a course release for Professor Seifker-Bailey to re-design her Reading, Writing and Inquiry course around the theme of Midwestern identity. The course will be offered two times during the award period, with time for evaluation and revision between the two semesters. Seifker-Bailey also plans to present her course and research at several academic conferences (Indiana College English Association, College English Association, Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature and more), to further the conversation about the value of investigating Midwestern literature in higher ed.

More specifically, while Professor Seifker-Bailey's proposed syllabus is not yet final, she plans to design a course that explores Midwestern literature and film with a focus on student-centered learning to understand the idea of the Midwest and how it affects the concept of students' own identities, especially in terms of sense of place and belonging. Seifker-Bailey cites Andrew R.L. (Drew) Cayton, history professor at Miami University in Ohio, who claims that the Midwestern region is "the Anti-region," one that defines itself by not defining itself with regional discourse. However, Seifker-Bailey sees unifying themes in Midwestern literature—generational, intergenerational, and familial—that she wishes to explore in the course she develops. She points out that authors present images of aging, questioningly hopeful, often sardonic characters in settings tied to the land, whether it is farmland, small town, suburban, or iconic Midwestern cities. Using Marilynne Robinson as an example, Seifker-Bailey shows that these characters are not driven by high drama, but they are linked to their past and their present by soil, seasons, and family that they embrace and reject in defining their own identities. Ultimately, whether urban, rural, or suburban, the themes of Midwestern literature connect to the notion of home, and to whether or not one feels a sense of belonging in that place. For students at IUPUC, these themes offer an opportunity for reflection on what it means to be a Midwesterner today.

IUPUI (INDIANAPOLIS)

Project Director: Rachel Wheeler

Timeline: Fall 2019 - Spring 2020

Major Activities & Products:

- Re-design of Religious History with focus on Midwestern identity
- Student field trips to Indiana State Museum and Conner Prairie
- Public event—presentation by Professor Jon Butler, award-winning historian and Professor Emeritus of History, Religious Studies and American Studies at Yale University

With the funding provided through the Campus Read, Professor Rachel Wheeler will further develop her course on Indiana Religious History (R173) in ways that encourage students to research and reflect on their identity as Midwesterners, and to present this research to various publics, including the IUPUI campus, and their own home communities by learning and implementing a variety of Digital Humanities methodologies.

Often termed “Flyover Country” by coastal Americans and “The Heartland” by residents, the Midwest has been the focus of more sustained attention from journalists, pundits and scholars in recent years. Regional history was once a dominant mode of American historical scholarship but had fallen out of favor. Now, however, there is something of a resurgence in regional identity and in particular in the intersection of religious and regional identities, as evident, for example in the creation in 2013 of the Midwestern History Association, and the publication of a spate of scholarly and trade books exploring Midwestern history and identity, including in 2019, Kristin Hoganson’s *The Heartland*, and Lyz Lenz’s journalistic memoir, *God Land: A Story of Faith, Loss, and Renewal in Middle America*.

In addition to *The Year We Left Home*, Wheeler will also assign James Madison’s *Hoosiers: A New History of Indiana* and Timothy Beal’s *Religion in America: A Very Short Introduction*. The first provides a detailed history of Indiana, while the second provides a thematic overview of American religious history. Throughout the semester, students are introduced to various resources and methods for the study of Indiana religious history. Students undertake a family religious biography relying on family interviews. In the second phase, students work on a religious “biography” of their home town (or a chosen town/region in Indiana). They will begin this project by reading relevant nineteenth century local town or county histories. In addition to reading these local histories, students will study the Indigenous history (and present!) of the region. In researching the religious history of their home regions, students will read relevant chapters from *Peopling Indiana* and *Hoosier Faiths*, they will learn to navigate historical newspapers available through *Hoosier State Chronicles* and to track recent data related to religious affiliation using the Association of Religion Data Archives as further sources for researching Indiana religious history.

Professor Wheeler has planned several field trips all aimed at introducing students to research methods and the public presentation of history, including the Indiana State Museum and Indiana Historical Society. Students will undertake a final field trip to Conner Prairie. In preparation, they will read excerpts of Charles Thompson’s 1937 *Sons of the Wilderness: John and William Conner* together with recent scholarship on Shawnee and Lenape people in Indiana. The story of the Conners—from living in a Middle Ground of lives deeply intertwined with Native peoples, to remaining in Indiana while his Native wife and family were part of the forced removal from the state—presents in microcosm the early history of Native-white relations in the region. Visiting Conner Prairie will provide students with the occasion to reflect on that history and how the history of Native presence and removal is presented to the public.

From their research and our various trips, students will choose one topic or question to research in greater detail. Students will then work to connect these various histories into an innovative presentation form: it might be a podcast, a poster, a story map, or a blog post, or a talk to be delivered to a local historical society. The overarching aim is for students to connect their own stories to Indiana history and the broader themes of American religious history.

UNIVERSITY OF INDIANAPOLIS (INDIANAPOLIS)

Project Directors: Laura Wilson, Ted Frantz, Rebecca McKanna, Leah Milne, Colleen Wynn, Elizabeth Ziff, Stephen Zimmerly

Timeline: Fall 2020 - Spring 2021

Major Activities & Products:

- Ambitious series of more than a dozen courses offered across disciplines (History, Political Science, English, Sociology)
- Public programming series
- Interdisciplinary student events to encourage conversation on themes

What does it mean to be a Hoosier? Generations have debated this question, with some advancing arguments that cut to the core ideas of community, identity, and belonging. Folklorists might still debate the origins or the term “Hoosier,” and further wonder how a term of derision became a nickname applied widely to state residents. Beyond the question of “what” remains a more pressing and interesting question of “who.” Who is a Hoosier? What does it take to “count” as one? The answer is more complex than a simple census count and more nuanced than general self-identification. Being and belonging, particularly in Midwestern communities that have evolved from their homogenous roots to embody diversity often only attributed to the country’s coasts, are a central theme articulated in Jean Thompson’s *The Year We Left Home*. They are shared in the perspectives of college students.

The University of Indianapolis has taken on an ambitious interdisciplinary effort to engage students in a single theme across many specialized areas of study. Students will engage with the ideas of *The Year We Left Home*, analyzing the novel through their own discipline’s lens, then come together with the community to explore the ideas in a more interdisciplinary manner. At the University of Indianapolis, roughly 8 in 10 students hail from Indiana. Many of them have not thought critically about the place from which they come, what it means to belong, and how those definitions may have changed depending on time, place, and circumstance. At the same time, nearly 1 of 10 students are international, hailing from one of the 68 different countries represented on campus. The student body exhibits a unique dichotomy of diversity, from native-born Hoosiers with Indiana roots older than the state itself to students whose experience in Indiana is their first ever outside their homeland.

After exploring the novel within their courses, the whole student group experience will consist of a film viewing of the classic *Hoosiers* (1986), a pre- and post-film discussion, and a trip downtown via public transportation to watch the Indiana Pacers during one of their Hickory Nights. The pre- and post-film panel, led by the faculty in participating courses, will help students identify the dichotomies emphasized in the plot, consider the value of nostalgia, and analyze how it represents Indiana and the Midwest through its perspective. Participants will connect the romanticized narrative portrayed in *Hoosiers* to Thompson’s text initially through small group sessions, leading to a larger conversation moderated by panelists, where participants will be encouraged to think about how and why a fictional event set in the rural 1950s has become intertwined with a major corporate presence that is strikingly urban.

The grant will help cover the course development and extensive revision to incorporate the novel as a foundational or supplementary text, in addition to individual activities specific to each course, customized to fit the disciplinary perspective and curriculum itself. These activities include neighborhood field trips to culturally diverse communities, speakers from relevant community partners (like the Burmese American Community Institute, Exodus, the Immigrant Welcome Center, etc.), viewing episodes from Indiana-centered TV shows (such as *Stranger Things* and *Parks and Recreation*), panel discussions comprised of students with unique and diverse backgrounds, and visits to local government offices in urban, suburban, and rural areas, among others. Each professor will tailor their courses to strategically and meaningfully incorporate the text, using the reading to explore the curriculum in an exciting and accessible manner.