2003

Searching for Michigan in the Midwest (Or, Learning and Teaching the Writing of Place)

Mary Elizabeth Pope
College of Notre Dame of Maryland

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm>

Recommended Citation

Pope, Mary Elizabeth (2003) "Searching for Michigan in the Midwest (Or, Learning and Teaching the Writing of Place)," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 19: Iss. 2, Article 11.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1266>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

SEARCHING FOR MICHIGAN IN THE MIDWEST(OR, LEARNING AND TEACHING THE WRITING OF PLACE)

MARY ELIZABETH POPE
COLLEGE OF NOTRE DAME OF MARYLAND

I was studying in South Africa six years ago when I first encountered the generic identity that Americans from the East or West Coasts sometimes assign to everyone who lives somewhere in the middle. One morning, as I hiked my way up Table Mountain with a handful of other American students, a young man from New York City who had just graduated from Harvard Medical School turned to me and said, "Now, you're from one of those "I" states, aren't you?" At the time it was the way he said it—*you're from Siberia, isn't that right?*—that bothered me more than the question itself.

"I'm from Michigan," I shot back, groping for a way to distinguish my home state from others in the Midwest, certain that there was one, though in truth I didn't have a ready response. I thought about it for the rest of the day, wondering what made Michigan different from the "I" states, and what made me, as a product of Michigan, different from people in Indiana, Illinois and Iowa. The larger contrasts between Michigan and other regions of the country—the East Coast, where my mother had been raised, or the South, where my father's parents had picked cotton for a living—seemed much more clear to me. I'd grown up listening to my mother's stories about moving to Arkansas after she married my father, where her school children brought pictures of their dead family members in coffins to class for show and tell, and the superintendent who hired her told her that she'd have a boy in her class who *wasn't right* because when his mother had been pregnant with him, she'd looked at a crazy person.

My father was hired at Central Michigan University in 1973, but even after thirty years in Mt. Pleasant, my mother never felt quite at home there,

either. She complained about the rural isolation of the town, the lack of what she called "culture." She'd grown up sailing on Narragansett Bay, and thought nearby Coldwater Lake was a "mud hole." One day after a doctor in Ann Arbor had inspected a lump on her thyroid, she came home and said, "Yesterday, someone told me that we live in the *Venison Belt*. This afternoon, the doctor told me I have a *Midwestern Goiter*. I'm getting the hell out of here." If my parents hadn't bought a cottage on Lake Michigan—a respectable body of water, my mother said—she might just have fled East after all.

On the other hand, it was all of the things my mother hated about living in Mt. Pleasant that my father liked. An avid hunter, he spent most winter nights up a tree with his bow. People in Michigan even seemed uppity to him after living in the south, and in protest he bought a battered 1975 Ford pickup truck and parked it in the faculty lot on campus for nearly twenty years.

Growing up, the lack or surplus of "culture" in Michigan was neither here nor there to me. I was only aware of how the grass smelled as my father mowed our lawn, and how the fresh cuttings always turned the paws of our white-footed dog green. I loved how October set the trees on fire with color, and how the air on Halloween night always smelled of frost and burning leaves. All through the fall, I would wait for the deep January snows, when my father would pack the neighborhood kids in the car with an assortment of sleds and drive us to Leonard Hill, which seemed mountainous in contrast to the flatness of the surrounding area. Afterward, we'd warm up with hot cocoa. And in the summer, when we weren't attending barbecues in the neatly-landscaped back yards of other professors, my family took trips to Northport, where the white sand of Christmas Cove burned my feet as I searched for Petoskey stones until I slipped into the dark waves of Lake Michigan feeling as supple as a fish. These were the boundaries of my whole world, and, until I was older, my parents' perspectives on life in other places only intruded on them in a vague way, like a dream you can almost remember, but not quite.

And yet, my parents' constant comparisons between Michigan, Arkansas, and Rhode Island led me to publish essays in places that identified me as a Michigan writer long before this Harvard student's question had me searching for a Michigan I could nail down, separate from "the Midwest," with boundaries as clear as the lines on a map. My mother's disdain, my father's discomfort, gave texture to Michigan in a way that parents who had lived there all their lives might not have been able to provide. But a few years after I returned from South Africa, when I began to teach creative nonfiction workshops as a graduate student at the University of Iowa, this question of locating Michigan within the "I" states nagged at me. I was teaching students to write essays about place, and felt compelled to understand what Michigan meant even more definitively than I had before, so that I could tell my students just where to look in attempting to encapsulate their own environments on paper.

By this time, I'd had the benefit of living in Iowa for three years, where four-way stops take forever because everyone smiles and waves each other on ("You go." "No, you go.") and cashiers who don't even know you will clip coupons out of the store flyer for you if you forgot to pick one up just to save you twenty cents on a gallon of milk. On one occasion, my Michigan license plate caused a sensation at a convenience store in the village of Oelwein, where no less than three customers and an employee said, "Wow, you're a long way from home." On another, I offended the proprietor of a pottery shop in Tiffin (a community surrounded by a ten mile radius of cornfield) when I asked her how her business survived in such a small town.

"This is greater Cedar Rapids," she informed me.

I also remembered experiences I'd had in other states in the Midwest, like the trip my family took to visit relatives in Hudson, Ohio, where we saw zoning so strict that the McDonald's looked like a saltbox colonial, with actual gold—not yellow—arches. The students at my cousin's high school in Hudson were equally zoned. Their polo shirts, button downs, khakis and penny loafers stood in

stark contrast to the cornucopia of style at Mt. Pleasant High School. We had jocks, goths, burnouts, a few preppies, though looking back, the clothing favored by most students seemed inspired by country music.

But details like these did not satisfy my desire to identify the difference between Michigan and other states in the Midwest, or how living there had shaped me, in part because so many of them could be attributed to other things, like the difference between a small village and a college town, or between a middle class community and a wealthy one. Mt. Pleasant might be more cosmopolitan than Oelwein, but no one in Iowa City had ever commented on my Michigan license plate because there were so many out-of-state students who lived there. And while the students at my cousin's high school in Ohio looked different from the kids I knew at Mt. Pleasant High School, they were almost identical to kids I knew from Grosse Pointe.

In light of these distinctions, even my parents' larger observations about place began to fall apart. My mother complained of a general lack of "class" among people in Arkansas, but her grandfather in Conimicut, Rhode Island had been the town drunk, and her aunt in Boston was rumored to have been a prostitute. And while a couple of her closest friends from the East Coast never bothered to call or send cards after her mother died, when my family had gone south for my other grandmother's funeral a few years earlier, farmers from Paragould, Arkansas to Cardwell, Missouri stopped working in their fields, climbed down off their tractors, and took off their hats as our anonymous funeral procession passed by. But my father's assessment of Michigan as *uppity* in comparison to Arkansas also seemed off when I considered that classes at Central Michigan were half empty or sometimes even cancelled on the opening day of rifle season.

In searching for the parameters of Michigan, the only hard facts I could come up with were things I'd learned in elementary school, where my teachers had attempted to instill in us a sense of state pride. In the third grade, we learned the acronym HOMES for the names of the Great Lakes. In fourth, we

studied the Native American heritage of cities like Saginaw, Washtenaw, Sebawaing, Ishpeming, and Dowagiac. This followed our geography lesson in the second grade where Mrs. Davis taught us that the lower peninsula of Michigan was shaped like a mitten. Wendy McWilliams raised her hand and told the class that her grandmother lived in The Thumb. Jimmy Monahan announced that his family was from The Pinky. This confused me because I'd been told that my father's mother in Missouri was from The Boot Heel, and I went home and asked my mother if my aunt in Connecticut lived in the The Elbow.

In sifting through these details, contradictions, and memories, what I came to understand is that while writing about place involves so much more than the acronyms, histories and maps I was exposed to in school, these truly are the only things about Michigan, or any place, for that matter, that *can* be nailed down. I should have understood this years before, when, as a graduate assistant at Central Michigan University, I asked a class of freshmen to write for a few minutes about the one thing in their lives that made them most proud. Charlie, a sweet kid who had grown up in a tiny farming community five miles from Mt. Pleasant and who still lived at home with his parents, wrote only one sentence on his paper, one sentence that showed me that the five miles that separated our upbringings might as well have been a million. It read: "I've got the biggest pole barn in all of Shepherd." I had to make four phone calls just to find out what a pole barn was, though I was pretty sure that "all of Shepherd" couldn't have been more than about three hundred people.

And yet, there is no denying that Iowa has a different feeling to it than Michigan does, or that growing up in Arkansas shapes you in a way that is different from the way that growing up in Rhode Island would. Place is real, and it is precisely because our sense of it changes as we move just to the east, just to the north, that the details about four-way stops and clothing styles and what kids bring to class for show-and-tell are all important. Individually, these details might not be representative of one particular state, county, or even

town, but stir them all together, and you begin to get somewhere.

What I now tell my students is that though Michigan may share certain things with Iowa or Ohio, it is the particular cocktail of subtleties—the details of geography, population, class, custom, slang, history, point in time—that gives a place its distinct flavor. If we write about our tiny corners of the world, and render them as truly as we can, then we've done our best. Our writing doesn't have to—and in fact, it usually can't—be representative of life in an entire state or region. I think of Charlie's Michigan—pole barns and "all of Shepherd"—and I think of mine—barbecues in the backyards of professors, playing with children who would almost all go on to graduate school—and I know that I can't speak for Charlie's Michigan any more than he can speak for mine.

Which brings me to my final point: Charlie hadn't even been trying to speak for Michigan. He was just answering a question about his life, which, I've discovered, is a good way to begin teaching students how to write about place. It requires nothing of them but the lives they've lived. Of course, if they've been lucky enough to have traveled or if they've at least encountered people who have, it will be easier for them to identify what makes their everyday lives distinct, just as it was initially easier for me to write about Michigan because of my parents' perspectives on it. But it isn't essential. Just by listing what is ordinary and routine to them, their likes and dislikes, their joys and fears, they can begin to identify the ingredients of the unique cocktail of influences that ties them to a particular place on the map.

If I had realized this six years ago, all I could have given that Harvard student anyway was a start on the recipe for mine: I dress up for work everyday, but never feel quite right in anything other than jeans. Living any place where trees do not abound makes me insecure. My hair is admittedly big. Overly-friendly and overly-alloof people make me equally nervous. Green Bean Casserole and Big Boy's Hot Fudge Ice Cream Cake are two of my favorite foods. I am not deeply suspicious of other

people, but I'm nobody's patsy, either. Nothing thrills me quite like the rickety rides at fruit festivals and county fairs. My CD case includes *The Best of Night Ranger* and music by other hair bands which I make no attempt to hide from visitors. And although at this point in my life I've spent a lot of time abroad, my favorite vacation spot in the world is still Northport. It's not as stunning as the Cape of Good Hope, not as dramatic as the Scottish Highlands or as charming as the Italian Riviera, but dawn will sometimes turn Grand Traverse Bay a shocking magenta, and if you can get to Barb's Bakery early enough to snag a chocolate-covered fry-cake to eat with your coffee, the show is even better.