In 2015, a group of historians met in Grand Rapids, Michigan, to chart a course for a rebirth in the study of the history of the American Midwest. The conference organizers turned into editors, and the papers presented there became the basis for the volume *Finding a New Midwestern History*. The editors situate the volume in a larger movement to revive midwestern history, a field that they note suffers from both popular and scholarly neglect. In this case, resurgence will require more than just serious scholarly attention to a region often wrongly considered boring and one-dimensional, worth only a fleeting glance from above by passengers flying from coast to coast. It will also need significant institutional support and infrastructure development at every level, from graduate training and professorships in midwestern history to enhanced archival collections, grants to fund research in them, and presses enthusiastic about publishing the results. Building (or rebuilding) a field of study is no small feat, and the editors of *Finding a New Midwestern History* are no fools. The book is an opening salvo meant to excite historians about the myriad opportunities midwestern history presents. In this way the volume serves as a springboard, not a prescriptive framework, for more extensive work that illuminates and uncovers what is missing.

The volume highlights broad contours of the region’s history. Compiling twenty-one assorted essays into a single volume was no doubt a challenge, and the editors accomplished the task by organizing them into six parts. Parts One and Two feature seven pieces with a broad geographic or theoretical scope, while essays in Parts Three, Four, Five, and Six examine topics more narrowly defined. All of the authors are established scholars, and the topics they present are not necessarily new. Analyzing their topics under the banner of midwestern history is novel, however, and offers exciting intellectual possibilities.
Part One contains three chapters that envision the Midwest as a region. Scholars Michael Steiner, James Davis, and Nicole Etcheson interrogate the formation of regional consciousness, the interplay of cultural expectations with the physical features of rivers, and the configuration of midwestern racial identities during and after the Civil War, respectively. Steiner traces the notion of the “Middle West” as it emerged in the 1890s, recognizing that ordering space can be a troublesome endeavor. Naming is a privileged and powerful act, reflective of positionality and perspective. Steiner rightly argues that regional theorizing obscures the indigenous people whose status both marginalized them and the names they bestowed on the area. When self-conscious Midwesterners fashioned images of their region, they did so with a precise vision in mind. Steiner traces how leading white professionals, including architect Frank Lloyd Wright, writer Hamlin Garland, and historian Frederick Jackson Turner, were some of the first to develop reflective regional theories and expressions. They simultaneously located the Midwest in the bounteous beauty of seemingly endless prairies and the tumultuous energy of boisterous cities. While each acknowledged the mosaic of peoples—indigenous, immigrant, African Americans, and native-born Americans, among others—who lived there, they saw the Midwest as a product of white settlement. Each claimed the Midwest as promised land, containing the very essence of democracy itself.

Davis and Etcheson also seek to bring the Midwest into regional focus. Davis examines why settlers often chose rivers and the bends, falls, or rapids that mark them—to avoid floods, to create defensive boundaries, to spur manufacturing with waterpower—for towns and farmsteads. Elements like wind and sunlight shaped economic and political impulses to build barns, courthouses, businesses, wells, and gardens, generating a set of guiding principles that people living scattered across the region nevertheless seemed to share. Etcheson sees the Midwest as a product of the Civil War. Since Upland Southerners settled many parts of the region, especially the Lower Midwest, pre-Civil War Midwesterners held remarkably similar views as Southerners did on race, politics, and cultural values. She argues that ending the war strained the commonalities, however, as Midwesterners, while not advocates of racial equality, did not seek racial retrenchment in the ways Southerners did.

Part Two adds four more chapters about the Midwest’s people. These essays bring further complexity to the regional focus of the first part, illuminating how indigenous communities, ethnic immigrant groups, native-born
Americans, and African Americans contributed to the Midwest’s vibrancy. For Susan Gray, the region’s indigenous history is sprawling, dynamic, and complex. She is right when she observes that the dominant narrative of midwestern history depends largely on silencing indigenous peoples whose historical presence and enduring persistence is obvious. She contextualizes the removal-and-absence narrative and re-centers it mainly around the Anishinaabeg and Ojibwe, noting how these groups responded to environmental and resource destruction in the late nineteenth century. Some moved to cities while others stayed put and sought redress from the federal government. By the mid-twentieth century, new urban networks fostered activism and agitation among indigenous peoples, notable especially in court decisions about broken indigenous land-use-rights treaties. Gray cautions against envisioning midwestern indigenous history as one of marginality, finding instead inter-tribally organized political actors with resolute commitments to preserving the region’s natural resources.

Gray’s nuanced take on mobility and persistence among indigenous peoples speaks to the work of Gregory Rose, Paula Nelson, and Jeffery Helgeson, who examine how the movement of other groups to the Midwest shaped its religious, civic, and economic cultures. Rose’s demographic snapshot of the 1850 census reveals how mostly white settlers considered agricultural potential, kinship clusters, and land prices, alongside emigrant guides, when deciding where to farm. Nelson locates late nineteenth-century midwestern civic society at the confluence of voluntary associations that pledged to uplift communities. Families, churches, women’s clubs, benevolence societies, fraternal lodges, and neighborly connections institutionalized the impulse for volunteerism and helpfulness in many small towns. For Helgeson, the Great Black Migration was a polarizing political process in which African American newcomers found both promise and peril. While it did not create racial inequalities in the Midwest, the Great Black Migration did bring to the fore long-simmering issues of racial segregation and subordination, particularly in urban contexts. While Helgeson identifies examples of powerful sources of black midwestern journalism (Jet and Ebony magazines), literature (Toni Morrison), and comedy (Richard Pryor), he concludes that unevenly developed urban centers fueled class distinctions and promoted turf battles while a discriminatory criminal justice system wrought havoc on black bodies.

Parts Three and Four provide further complexity by examining midwestern icons and landscapes. Six more chapters add analysis on topics ranging from small towns and sports to spirituality and cities. In each one, scholars seek to
interrogate symbols, myths, and assumptions about the Midwest by assessing key examples or case studies. In his study of midwestern small towns, John Miller notes that songs, poems, magazine articles, paintings, and sermons created images that perpetuated stereotypes of the region. Small towns were actual places, he remarks, with practical designs informed by farming concerns, railroad development, the grid system, river features, automobile traffic, and economic expansion. Read alongside essays by James Davis and Paula Nelson, Miller’s piece reveals the often-overlooked energy that reverberated in midwestern small towns. In a similar fashion, David McMahon discusses Midwesterners’ intense and abiding love of sports, especially at the high school and collegiate levels. He blasts conventional narratives that ignore or misconstrue the history of sports in the Midwest. Midwestern sport culture often transcended ethnic, racial, and gendered boundaries, allowing marginalized groups opportunities to compete in ways they could not in other regions. Finally, Jon Butler claims the Midwest as perhaps the most religiously complex region, full of both lively spiritual expressions and harsh conflicts. He indicts Garrison Keillor’s “Lake Wobegon” for obscuring a vibrant history where Catholic, Muslim, Bahá’í, Mormon, and Lutheran churches, not to mention a host of indigenous practices, flourished. Like Miller and McMahon, Butler rejects simplistic, yet stubbornly persistent, assumptions that mischaracterize the Midwest in troubling ways.

Another trio of scholars undertake change-over-time analyses about the Corn Belt, river cultures, and urban development to revise regional narratives. Christopher Laingen examines four geographic analyses of the Corn Belt, made in 1927, 1950, 2012, and 2014, concluding that irrigation practices, a shift from grain-livestock farming to cash-grain farming, and burgeoning global demand for corn- and soy-based products moved the fringes of the region. Michael Allen traces the changes in midwestern river culture from the Hopewellian and Mississippian people to the age of steamboat power. Rivers and their traffic encouraged racial, economic, political, and artistic encounters. Allen offers a perspective often lost in the midwestern settlement narrative, one that decenters a single east-west trajectory and replaces it with a multidirectional view from keels and flatboats. Just as Laingen and Allen engage with transformative processes that have shaped the Midwest, so, too, does Jon Teaford. Teaford studies midwestern cities, arguing that the eleven largest metropolitan areas that emerged between 1830 and 1890 remained the same urban powerhouses into the twentieth century. Unlike southern and western cities, which came of age in the twentieth century, midwestern cities
were the products of specific nineteenth-century technological and economic forces. Transporting minerals, livestock, and grain made these urban centers into manufacturing, processing, and distribution hubs.

The final two parts, Parts Five and Six, take up questions about midwestern voices and experiences. In Part Five, scholars Zachary Michael Jack, James Seaton, James Leary, and David Pichaske identify four distinct midwestern voices—muralists, intellectuals, musicians, and writers. Their lists comprise expected names, including muralist Grant Wood, political theorist Russell Kirk, musician Bob Dylan, and novelist Ole Rolvaag. While these scholars agree that a midwestern regionalist lens shaped its most prominent voices, most notably in the subjects chosen, values ascribed, and artistry demonstrated, their descriptions of it diverge in marked ways. Jack places egalitarianism, plainness, and homeliness as central to the region. Seaton names cultural conservatism, traditional morality, and American patriotism as essential features, while Pichaske contends that the historic struggle for survival on a harsh frontier enshrined cherished midwestern values of family, morality, and hard work. Only Leary, who studies musicians in Chicago from the 1890s through the 1930s, proclaims a definition elusive. Instead, he identifies a diverse soundscape—polka, yodeling, jazz, powwow drums, blues, gospel, fiddling, polkabilly—made by people as equally complex and who saw the Midwest as both a destination and a crossroads. Underlying these disagreements are serious questions about the privileged process of deciding who speaks for the Midwest and why their voices should resonate more than others.

Contested characterizations of midwestern regionalism resonate in the final four essays that investigate midwestern experiences. Gleaves Whitney analyzes the influences of Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, and John Adams on what became the Midwest. He notes that these three men wrote feverishly about what they considered a promised land, constructing overlapping but competing visions of the Midwest as agrarian, commercial, and virtuous. Pamela Riney-Kehrberg finds the midwestern experience of childhood a challenge to describe when a kaleidoscope of rural and urban experiences, intersected by class, race, and gender, encompassed it. Hank Meijer chronicles the contradictions that illuminate the life of Michigan politician Arthur Vandenberg, discovering the fascinating story of how he came to call fellow Midwesterners Sinclair Lewis and Robert Taft both friends and foes. Vandenberg remained thoroughly midwestern while making a profoundly global mark as a leading delegate to the United Nations, primary drafter of the Marshall Plan, and architect of the enabling resolution for NATO. Finally, J. L. Anderson
probes assumptions of midwestern identity after World War II when mass culture seemed to obliterate regional difference. But a distinct midwestern identity persisted, Anderson argues, one that embraced both conformity and cosmopolitanism. He encourages historians to move past fictional accounts like Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon that create flat, one-dimensional narratives and that overlook the magnificent complexity of the Midwest.

*Finding a New Midwestern History* provides convincing proof that the Midwest requires serious scholarly engagement. The twenty-one essays reveal a region bursting with unexplored questions about its past. Almost every author concludes with a set of remarks that outlines major historical gaps and challenges scholars to fill them. At issue is not only a dearth of substantive research that uncovers the dizzying complexity of the Midwest but also a lack of sophisticated theoretical frameworks that distinguish it. Midwestern history has neither a robust scholarly canon nor a compelling analytical lens. Instead, as the scholars featured in *Finding a New Midwestern History* argue, the region's history suffers from a series of assumptions that pigeonhole it as backward and boring. These essays serve as a first step by providing modes to inquire into the complex narratives that these authors illuminate. It promises to be electrifying work.

The volume makes clear that a primary task for historians of the Midwest is untangling the emergence-as-a-region narrative. For scholars like Seaton and Pichaske, the Midwest became recognizable in the late nineteenth century, when white people, entranced by the potential of a promised land, settled the region and brought cherished political and moral principles. Out of the fortitude of these Euro-Americans came unrivaled economic progress. Many of the people cited in *Finding a New Midwestern History*, from Grant Wood to Garrison Keillor to Frederick Jackson Turner, not only shaped this vision but also came to define an essentialist midwestern identity. Yet this narrative is the very same one that many other scholars seek to complicate. Steiner, Gray, Rose, Helgeson, Miller, McMahon, Butler, Allen, Leary, Riney-Kehlberg, Meijer, and Anderson all claim the Midwest as a region of brilliant and enduring complexity, one that defies such a narrow vision. *Finding a New Midwestern History* calls on scholars to take on serious investigations of a host of topics still missing, such as indigenous history and LGBTQA+ histories, as well as histories of capitalism, agriculture, race, immigration, gender, politics, and environment.

Engaging with myths and stereotypes raises exciting questions about periodization, geography, and distinctiveness. There is little in the volume before
about 1850, and scholars need to wrestle with what happened before the Midwest was the Midwest. A revised periodization overtly challenges the conventional settlement narrative by asking questions that require evidence from often overlooked perspectives to answer them. Historians also ought to contend with the land and its features. On this point, historians of agriculture and rural life can contribute much. Taking a cue from Davis, Laingen, Allen, and Teaford, historians should continue to inquire into the contours of the region’s boundaries, the interplays between rural and urban, and the effects flat prairies or rushing rivers had on the people who inhabited the region. How midwestern farmers grew, processed, and distributed the foods consumed—and the meanings and consequences of that system—is a topic worthy of further investigation.

Finally, conclusions demand testing. To what extent did the Midwest really differ from the South in terms of racial ideology and racist policies after the Civil War? How did indigenous midwestern intellectuals shape the region? How and in what ways did LGBTQA+ individuals and groups contribute to midwestern politics? These questions only begin a long list of what is missing. In addition to posing questions like these, historians should also pursue more interregional comparisons and study the Midwest in global contexts. It is time to get to work.