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The Middle (review)

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Feminist scholar Uma Narayan observes how Western stereotypes of those who live in the so-called third world enable injustice and oppression to be “explained away” as merely symptomatic of a “national culture” that is somehow “timeless” and “outside history.”¹ Worrisome in some contemporary discussions about LGBTQ rights across the globe is a similar explanation of antigay bigotry, not as a transnationally circulated discourse partly imported from the U.S., but as a cultural norm. Without the juxtaposition of images in *God Loves Uganda*, Ugandan religious practices risk being explained away as “cultural,” deemed symptomatic of a “dark” and “backward” third world.

God Loves Uganda indirectly critiques this line of reasoning because it shows the transnational nature of oppressive discourse and its influence by capitalist logic and conservative values. Williams helps viewers understand that these images of religious and political hatred are a result of cultures in contact. The Midwest is no more isolated than Uganda as the two collaborate on policy and profit at the expense of the poor and dispossessed.

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NOTE

1. Uma Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third World Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 53.

The Middle, ABC, 2009–.

During a 2011 panel discussion at the Paley Center for Media in New York with the stars and creators of *The Middle*—the hit ABC sitcom about a decidedly lower middle class family of five living in the middle of the country—lead actress Patricia Heaton tried to explain the secret to the show’s success across such a broad socioeconomic range of viewers: “We are very specifically midwestern, and very specifically economically lower middle class and struggling . . . and I think specificity makes everything much more universal.”

Certainly the show’s regular opening sequence of an empty road surrounded by corn fields with crows cawing in the background seems to establish an explicit and specific midwestern location and identity, as does

Heaton's accompanying voiceover with matching images: "Orson, Indiana: heart of the heartland, proud home of Little Betty snack cakes, the demolition derby for the homeless, and the world's largest polyurethane cow." This montage shrewdly blends a detached commentary on the town's—and by extension, the region's—déclassé culture with genuine hometown pride. What is most striking about this supposedly "specifically midwestern" show, however, is how rarely it represents, in anything more than a passing way, an actual midwestern locale rooted in an agricultural economy. Instead it presents an imagined but firmly entrenched portrait of the Midwest as the "all American" home of supposedly unique "heartland" values of close families, hard work, and "authenticity."

The Middle comically presents the daily trials and tribulations of the Heck family, which comprises working mother Frankie Heck (Heaton), her husband Mike (Neil Flynn) who is the foreman at a quarry, and their school aged children, Axl (Charlie McDermott), Sue (Eden Sher), and Brick (Atticus Shaffer). At the heart of the show's conceptualization and its cultural meaning is its construction of a mutually reinforcing social, cultural, and psychological "middleness" that conflates American geographic centrality, socioeconomic and cultural middle class identity (or more accurately, that of the *petit bourgeoisie*), ideological moderation, and middle age sensibility. Of these elements, the geographic component is the one presented with the least nuance and specificity.

The pilot episode's opening scene promised an instructive counter-response to the idea of the region as literal and figurative "flyover country" for coastal elites. "Some people call this the middle of nowhere," Frankie Heck's voice intones as the show began, "you know, one of those places that you fly over from somewhere to somewhere else but you wouldn't live here." The scene then rapidly transitions to a flight attendant on a jet liner far overhead encouraging people to look down on "the great state of Indiana," immediately followed by a quick cut to the airline passengers studiously doing anything *but* look out the window. Heck then chimes in again, as the screen flashes a cartoonish map of the plane's route between Boston and LAX: "Well, look down next time and you'll see us down here in the middle."¹

Yet over the rest of the episode and continuing through the following six seasons, the show has offered few insights into the actual Midwest and its people. Certainly there are occasional references to midwestern and especially Indiana place markers, such as a Heck family trip to Chicago, a Halloween episode that features a corn maze, or local sports teams. (Indiana

Hoosiers basketball tickets briefly feature in one storyline, the Indianapolis Colts as Mike's favorite team in others.) In general, though, there is little to indicate that the program takes place in a definitive midwestern locale, or, more to the point, that such a socioeconomic and physical landscape would be any different from a suburban landscape anywhere else in the country. There have been a few exceptional episodes with a more explicit midwestern focus, including one that focuses on the town's one hundred year anniversary celebration—the "Orsontennial" as they call it—in which the Hecks drive a float shaped like an enormous cow, as well as another episode about a college tour by Sue and Mike of actual Indiana universities. Nonetheless, for the most part, the show could take place in almost any smallish U.S. town outside the immediate area of major metroplexes.

This is perhaps not that surprising given that the program is filmed on a back lot in Burbank. Even the opening sequence of fields was filmed around Oxnard, California, and had to have corn stalks digitally added.² In the Paley interview cited above, cocreator Eileen Heisler acknowledges that the show was "never intended . . . to be a show where the middle of the country would say, yay! Finally I'm recognized." Instead, she explains "you write it for everyone." Yet she and her cocreator DeAnn Heline framed this rather differently in an interview with an Indianapolis local news reporter who visited the Hollywood set in 2012. "It's a love letter to the Midwest," Heline told the reporter, who gushed that the show is "packed with Hoosier references" and "midwestern expressions," although the sole example she provided was "pop" for soft drinks. In the interview, Heline and Heisler claimed that the show celebrates uniquely midwestern qualities; the pair used words such as "genuine" and "hardworking" to describe these regional characteristics. After the conclusion of the interview segment, the local anchor back in Indianapolis proudly asked the reporter, "They are still holding on to their midwestern roots aren't they?" The beaming reporter concurred.³

Heisler and Heline indeed were raised in midwestern cities (Heisler in Chicago, Heline outside of Cincinnati), and the two met at Indiana University and have worked as cowriters and coproducers ever since graduating college. (They both transferred to New York University). Their responses to the Indianapolis reporter and her reaction, however, are key to understanding the "Midwest" the show depicts. *The Middle* does not focus on a actual physical place shaped by real economic and social circumstances, but rather a symbolic locale defined by a set of romanticized conceptual qualities of

“realness” and “Americanness”—largely defined as white, Christian, and middle class—that are supposedly exceptional to the Midwest. In so doing, the show reinforces “heartland” tropes that have long played a central role in the televised national imaginary of postwar America.⁴

To be fair, *The Middle* is hardly alone in filming its show on a studio lot rather than on location, or in presenting a mythologized America. Furthermore, to its great credit, the show is a far more honest representation of the daily lives of most Americans than are most other televised situation comedies. The creators eschew the typical multicamera film format and built-in laugh track, and the episodes routinely offer a generally honest (if comically presented) depiction of struggling lower middle class life. The Heck home is marked by a constant state of mess but not filth, and their lowbrow home décor is represented as brightly colored but functional kitsch. The Heck children speak and act like kids actually do rather than simply spouting punchlines, and the show depicts with genuine understanding child-parent relationships and the hardships that face working moms.

Unfortunately, *The Middle* breaks little new ground in its representation of the Midwest itself. The program reinforces the widespread notion that the region’s people are interchangeable and homogenous. Thus, although *The Middle* ostensibly sets out to challenge a vision of the Midwest as a “flyover” space that is rightfully ignored and forgotten, it has ended up reaffirming this very “flyover” mentality. It is therefore yet another popular cultural form that frames the Midwest as both hopelessly banal and undifferentiated and, at the same time, the home of the “real America.”

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NOTES

1. *The Middle*, ABC, Sept. 30, 2009.
2. Ryan Reynolds, “Roll credits: New ABC Sitcom won’t use ‘Jasper, Ind.’ after all,” *Evansville Courier & Press*, May 29, 2009.
3. “ABC’s ‘The Middle’ Loaded with Hoosier Connections,” WRTV (Indianapolis), May 9, 2012, theindychannel.com/entertainment/abc-s-the-middle-loaded-with-hoosier-connections.
4. For the imagined Midwest as both celebrated and derided on American television, see Victoria Johnson, *Heartland TV: Prime Time Television and the Struggle for U.S. Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).