
PART I
History and Theory of
Regionalism in the
United States

Contemporary Regionalism

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“The idea of a regional literature is an odd one,” the novelist Marilynne Robinson contends, because it is “the product of a cultural bias that supposes books won’t be written in towns you haven’t heard of before.” But it contains a blessing, in her opinion, because “it makes people feel that they live in a peculiar place. Of course, people, by definition, do live in a peculiar place. But if they become aware of this peculiarity as something exceptional they are stimulated to an enriching interest in the particulars of their own lives” (Robinson 1992: 65–6). American regionalism is steeped, like strong tea, in the details of particular places as they have been filtered through a writer’s imagination. In fact, one of the central impulses in American literature – one shared by Thoreau and Cather, Faulkner and Silko, Stevens and Didion, Hurston and Welty – has been to evoke what Frederick Turner (echoing D. H. Lawrence) calls a “spirit of place.” These evocations involve more than simply background color or a little local seasoning. The “spirit of place” in literature springs from a sense of belonging and human attachment. It also tends to be refracted through the “spirit of time,” whether in human history or in the deeper temporal reaches of geology and forests. This is what makes for “deep,” “thick,” or “dense” descriptions that create a three-dimensional sense of memory and life and that capture what might be called the local metabolism of American places. The best American regional writing tends to be less about a place than *of* it, with a writer’s central nervous system immersed in the local ecology, subcultures, hidden history, and spoken idioms of a given location.

Yet we sometimes forget that American authors were often driven to evoke this kind of “spirit” precisely because it was felt to be absent and uncelebrated in American life. The gradual creation of a national literary landscape of specific places (Faulkner’s Mississippi, Twain’s Hannibal, Steinbeck’s Salinas, and so on) was largely a response to a more general belief that the landscape Americans inhabited was, as Turner says, “an ahistorical landscape, one without spirit and without life” (1989: x). Regional authors still have to combat historical amnesia, but a sense of historical

belatedness now further muddies the waters in which they swim. They still have to shoulder aside American ignorance or misperceptions about local places, but they also have to do so in ways that haven't yet been done in classic evocations of "place" in American literature. ("The presence alone of Faulkner," Flannery O'Connor once remarked, "makes a great difference in what the [Southern] writer can and cannot permit himself to do. Nobody wants his mule and wagon stalled on the same track the Dixie Limited is roaring down" [O'Connor 1969: 45].) In addition, regional authors often have to wrench their work free from popular, overpublicized representations of regional identity. A writer eager to catch the texture of contemporary life in Minnesota, for instance, may have to contend less with the ghosts of Sinclair Lewis and Ole Rólvaag than with the melodious ironies of Garrison Keillor's radio shows on Lake Wobegon or the regional stereotypes in movies like *Grumpy Old Men* (1993) and *Fargo* (1996). We don't tend to hear, after all, about Hmong culture, or prairie restoration, or tribal spearfishing rights, or grids of genetically engineered soybeans in Lake Wobegon.

Contemporary literary regionalism in the United States – a rich, capacious body of work that resists easy classification – might best be defined by two contradictory cultural attitudes encapsulated as follows: "Region Matters" and "Yes, Isn't It Pretty to Think So?" Regional art and identity have never seemed stronger in American society, yet there is a nagging suspicion that they may be increasingly peripheral in a postmodern "Planet Reebok" world of convenience, mobility, and postindustrial economies that run on global flows of information and capital. High claims are made for "living in place," for digging in and staying put, and becoming native to the places we inhabit. At the same time, increasingly large numbers of Americans feel less tied to and less aware of the places in which they live. As Pico Iyer puts it in *The Global Soul*, the question "'Where do you come from?'" is coming to seem as antiquated an inquiry as "'What regiment do you belong to?'" (2000: 11). A recent statewide survey of the public by the California Council for the Humanities, for example, reported that only 21 percent of Californians strongly agreed that their city or town had a strong sense of community; 65 percent of the survey respondents said they knew only a "little or nothing at all about the history of their communities,"¹ and 67 percent said they knew "little or nothing at all about the cultural backgrounds of the people in their communities." (Robert Putnam's exhaustive and much-discussed new study of the decline of community and "social capital" in America, *Bowling Alone* [2000], suggests that this is a strong national trend.) How are we to understand such contradictions? And how do they inform or deform American regional art and identity?

The signs of a strong, expansive interest in and support for regional identity are effervescing in any number of venues: in successful regional theaters and art museums; in expanding membership in local historical societies and watershed partnerships; in Chautauquas, "living history" exhibits, and touring one-man or one-woman shows focused on local historical figures; in "multicultural" urban food-fests and community-building cultural pride festivities; in centennial, sesquicentennial,

and bicentennial celebrations of statehood or historical events like the California Gold Rush or the Lewis and Clark expedition; in popular regional magazines, from *Sunset* to *Southern Living*; in active state humanities councils, as well as in land conservation and historical restoration projects that seek to protect and restore the natural resources and historical “treasures” of a region; in Ken Burns’s high-profile documentary series on the Civil War and the West; in local jazz concerts and folk festivals; even in the plethora of local wineries, farmers’ markets, Community Supported Agriculture cooperatives, brewpubs, and microbreweries that now dot the map, most celebrating some aspect of local history or ecology and capitalizing on a taste for regional cuisine.

Every major region of the country now also boasts a large research center, like the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi and the Center of the American West at the University of Colorado. The National Endowment for the Humanities is presently in the process of helping fund a number of new regional centers of research and public outreach around the country. Regional writing in particular seems to be enjoying a renaissance of interest. New regional book awards honor local (as well as international) talent. Regional book festivals, conferences, and benefits bring together authors and (often first-time) readers. New and old literary journals and magazines with a strong regional flavor (*Zyzzyva*, *Ruminator Review*, *Northern Lights*, *Sewanee Review*, and *Great Plains Quarterly*, to name a few) continue to flourish. Professional organizations like the Western Literature Association (founded in 1965) are thriving. Despite the incursions of corporate chain stores and online ordering companies, many independent regional bookstores somehow manage to hold on and sponsor active reading series. Radio programs like David Dunaway’s series *Writing the Southwest* (1995), or the American Library Association’s regional literature series, entitled “StoryLines America” (begun in 1999), or joint audio/book projects like *Texas Bound* (1993), in which Texas actors like Tommy Lee Jones read Texas stories, continue to introduce important works of regional literature to a wide audience. Many regional publishers (Heyday Books in Berkeley, for instance, or Milkweed Editions in Minneapolis) continue to publish high-quality literary works. Many reputable university presses either reprint regional classics, as in the University of California’s “California Fiction” series, or sponsor regional series, like the “Literature of the American West” series at the University of Oklahoma Press. Local literary festivals and cultural events (or extravaganzas, like the Cowboy Poetry Festival in Elko, Nevada) frequently gain national attention. Guides to regional art and culture are readily available. *The Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* was a national bestseller, while *The Literary History of the American West*, in 1987 – which weighed in at 1,353 pages: longer than most literary histories of the United States as a whole – was followed by *Updating the Literary West* (1997). Recent anthologies like *The Literature of California* (2000), *Great and Peculiar Beauty: A Utah Reader* (1995), *Georgia Voices* (begun 1992), and *The Last Best Place: A Montana Anthology* (1988) have expanded and enriched the sweep of American literature. This *Companion* itself is a sign of the continuing interest and vitality of regional writing and criticism.

It would be small-minded not to feel heartened in some way by this outpouring of regional energy. The resurgence of interest in regional history, identity, and culture might be seen, in its most promising light, as America's coming of age. The United States, one might hope, is finally beginning to acknowledge and appreciate the fascinating intricacies of its landscape and history. Yet much of the popular focus on regional identity, as Hal Rothman has shown, relies heavily on "scripted space" (Rothman 1998: 12). Touting of regional identity – whether in Salt Lake City or Williamsburg – frequently partakes of the "heritage" movement: a promotional impulse that often has more to do with kitsch, nostalgia, and economic "growth coalitions" than with any deep-rooted or stabilizing sense of community. The packaging and marketing of regional history and experience as commodities tends, unsurprisingly, to be distrusted by historians and writers because that process too often casts history in a soft-focus celebratory vein that downplays discordance and conflict, ignores racial and ethnic diversity, and simplifies natural features into familiar icons (wheatfields, Spanish Moss swamps, mitten buttes) that hide regional distinctiveness more than they reveal it. "I do not know what 'reality' really is," the historian Daniel J. Boorstin says in his book *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, "but somehow I do know an illusion when I see one" (1961: ix). Regional writers might heartily agree, as many of them see regional promotion and the clamor for regional distinctiveness as so much snakeoil, a kind of commercial flotsam that usually interferes with rather than facilitates in-depth understandings of a region. Barry Lopez has used the term "false geographies" to refer to a congeries of romantic preconceptions by means of which the "essential wildness" and "almost incomprehensible depth and complexity" of the American landscape have been reduced to "attractive scenery" (1990: 55). Many Americans, he says, now think about their country in terms of a "memorized landscape" (visually memorized – in a television ad, a calendar, or a computer screen saver – *before* it has been actually experienced). This creates a homogenized national geography that seems to operate independently of the land, Lopez says; "a collection of objects rather than a continuous bolt of fabric" (1990: 62).

Regional writers often have to deal not only with selective historical memory, but with a plethora of predigested and preassigned images and characters which eclipse other, more searching evocations of a place. When Lyman Ward, the maimed and cranky historian who narrates Wallace Stegner's novel *Angle of Repose* (1971), starts out to record the story of his grandparents' lives in the American West, he encounters a problem familiar to regional writers. He wishes to avoid writing the kind of book his son Rodman – whose "notion of somebody interesting is numbingly vulgar" – would like him to do:

Having no historical sense, [Rodman] can only think that history's interest must be "color." How about some Technicolor personality of the Northern Mines, about which I already know so much? Lola Montez, say, that wild girl from an Irish peat bog who became the mistress of half the celebrities of Europe, including Franz Liszt and Dumas,

père or *filz* or both, before taking up with King Ludwig I of Bavaria, who made her Countess of Landsfeld. And from there, in 1856, to San Francisco, where she danced the spider dance for miners and fortune hunters (*No, Lola, no!*) and from there to Grass Valley to live for two years with a tame bear who couldn't have been much of an improvement on Ludwig. That's Rodman's idea of history. Every fourth-rate antiquarian in the West has panned Lola's poor little gravel. My grandparents are a deep vein that has never been dug. They were *people*. (Stegner 1971: 22)

Lyman knows the details of Lola Montez's life (which makes his dismissal of them more convincing), but he also knows that a fascination with self-dramatizing regional "color" obscures an interest in establishing the historical depth that might complicate or reconfigure such one-dimensional historical portraiture. As Cynthia Shearer notes, *à propos* of the South, "the Southern writers' rage to explain . . . is mostly a feeling that if you want something done right, you have to do it yourself" (2000: 55).

The "vulgar" or overly dramatic attempt to establish regional distinctiveness often seems to prompt a response in an opposite direction: a deliberate deflation of scenic or mythic preconceptions of a landscape and its people. The Wyoming of Jackson Hole and Yellowstone, for instance, is nowhere in sight in Annie Proulx's short-story collection *Close Range*, though we do get a glimpse of some tourists on a dude ranch, who are taken "up into the mountains where tilted slopes of wild iris aroused in them emotional displays and some altitude sickness" (Proulx 1999: 154). For the most part, however, Proulx's Wyoming is at "the bunchgrass edge of the world." She creates a memorable, hardscrabble rogue's gallery of knotheads, troublemakers, lonely hearts, and dreamers, pink-slipped somewhere else in a company downsizing and drifting through town. Proulx's stories are peopled with ne'er-do-well antiheroes who are unlikely to appear in brochures from the Wyoming Visitors' Bureau. This kind of antimythic puncturing of regional stereotypes appears around the country, like bullet holes in rural traffic signs, in much hard-edged regionalist writing: in New England (in Russell Banks's novels *Affliction* [1989] and *Continental Drift* [1985]); in the South (in Cormac McCarthy's novel *Child of God* [1973] or Dorothy Allison's novel, *Bastard Out of Carolina* [1992]), in the Midwest (in Jane Smiley's novel *A Thousand Acres* [1991]); and in the West (in collections of stories like Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* [1993], Sharon Doubiago's *The Book of Seeing with One's Own Eyes* [1988], novels such as Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* [1985], and poetry like Adrian Louis' *Blood Thirsty Savages* [1994]). Contemporary regional authors often resist regional preconceptions in an intentionally discomforting or raunchily comic manner – and, as in the case of Proulx, they cannot always extricate themselves successfully from the myths and stereotypes with which they wrestle.²

If the Scylla of the regional imagination is too much identity (the overdone or stereotypical), the Charybdis is no identity at all: the fear, in Gertrude Stein's notorious formulation, that there's no there there in American regionalism. How can a

writer celebrate the uniqueness of local places when they begin to feel less and less distinctive? Writers must now face the fact that large portions of the United States, from Tucson to Milwaukee and from Seattle to Tampa Bay, look and feel largely identical. James Howard Kunstler has characterized much of the contemporary American landscape as “the geography of nowhere.” If you were to be kidnapped today in Southern California, the journalist Ray Suarez wryly hypothesizes, “your captors might not even have to blindfold you. You could drive for hours and not think you had gone anywhere. If you were to break away and reach a phone, your surroundings – a 76 gas station, a Taco Bell, a Pep Boys, a used-car lot, and mountains in the smoggy distance – would be of no use at all to the police” (Suarez 1999: 18). Contemporary evocations of place in America often seem embattled, unsettled, and besieged: at odds – often overwhelming odds – with attitudes and economic, technological, and social forces that threaten the local distinctiveness of the American landscape, both rural and urban. Overscheduled and overstimulated Americans, the feeling goes, have grown numb to the importance of place in their lives. Members of an “attention deficit disorder” society, they have increasingly opted for privacy, convenience, and consumption over community, shared public spaces, and a dense street culture. Distracted by information technologies that claim to connect but that frequently replace human contact, they have fallen prey to an image-based “hypercapitalism,” in which brand names replace products. (“The universities now offer only one serious major,” Wes Jackson quips: “upward mobility” [1994: 3].) Habitable communities become commodities to be purchased rather than entities to be created through collective effort. Americans are increasingly surrounded by a Velveeta landscape of sprawling, look-alike suburbs, traffic-choked expressways full of drivers on cellphones, and huge, corporate superstores with acres of parking lots. The spiritual as well as physical “macadamization” of contemporary America has eroded the distinctiveness of individual places and pre-emptively discouraged people from caring about them.

To put this another way, if one were to update the end of Willa Cather’s novel *My Ántonia* (1918), Ántonia Cuzak’s children, instead of helping make *kolaches*, planting hollyhocks, or showing guests a new “fruit cave” with barrels of pickled watermelon rinds, might be checking their palm pilots and sipping from Nalgene water bottles before heading to the Black Hawk mall to rent DVDs. (Leo might be listening to Bohemian hip-hop and wondering whether Black Hawk is ready for a tattoo parlor; Anna and Yulka might be dreaming of SUVs or a new dot.com start-up in Omaha; Nina might tend to Britney Spears and Pokémon cards.) In other words, pop culture and hip consumerism might have so saturated the children as to overwhelm or displace the experience of growing up in rural Nebraska towns, “buried in wheat and corn,” as Cather’s Jim Burden puts it, where “burning summers” alternate with “blustery winters . . . when the whole country is stripped bare and gray as sheet-iron” (Cather 1918: 1).

This kind of (admittedly exaggerated) juxtaposition is perhaps easiest to make with regard to children, because of the importance of a child’s formative years, when

memory, place, and identity are inextricably intertwined. Children, Mary Austin declared, are “at heart the most confirmed regionalists. What they like as background for a story is an explicit, well mapped strip of country, as intensively lived into as any healthy child lives into his own neighborhood” (1932: 102). The occasion for this remark was an article entitled “Regionalism in American Fiction,” hardly a peripheral topic by Austin’s lights. For her, “the source of all art” arose “as people truly and rudely say, in our ‘guts,’ the seat of life and breath and heartbeats, of loving and hating and fearing” (Austin 1932: 98). The “guts” of art arose not only from physiology and emotion, but from the local environmental factors that had already molded them: “No sort of experience . . . works so constantly and subtly upon man as his regional environment. It orders and determines all the direct, practical ways of his getting up and lying down, of staying in and going out, of housing and clothing and food-getting; it arranges by its progressions of seed times and harvest, its rain and wind and burning suns, the rhythms of his work and amusements. It is the thing always before his eye, always at his ear, always underfoot” (Austin 1932: 97).

Austin’s emphasis upon “regional environment” was proportional to her concern that Americans did not care about it. Opposing the rhythms of seed times and harvest and loving evocations of the land was the American reading public’s preference for “something less than the proverbial bird’s-eye view of the American scene, what you might call an automobile eye view, something slithering and blurred, [with] nothing so sharply discriminated that it arrests the speed-numbered mind to understand, characters like garish gas stations picked out with electric lights” (Austin 1932: 107). This image of urban anonymity and anesthesia (for which a bird’s eye is an unsuitably organic metaphor) invokes a phantom opposite that has historically helped define “regional” experience, especially as regionalism has been associated with rural culture. The Southern Agrarians had voiced similar concerns two years earlier in *I’ll Take My Stand* (1930). The “speed-numbered” mind of contemporary – typically urban – society has for some time now been deemed particularly unsuited to an appreciation of the slower rhythms and local nuances of rural locales, whether agrarian or not. This is an idea inherited from a late nineteenth-century conception of “local color,” which conceived of regional writers as provincials writing at a remove from the centers of commerce and culture. Regionalism in this guise is also tied to that “complex blend of accommodation and protest” that T. J. Jackson Lears calls “antimodernism” (1981: xiii), which, in the early twentieth century, recoiled from “overcivilized” modern existence and looked for more intense and more authentic forms of physical and spiritual experience.

Yet contemporary regionalism is not best thought of by excluding writers who write about urban areas. No longer can we claim that when we are discussing regional writers we are “really” talking about, say, Ivan Doig or Louise Erdrich or Mary Oliver or Wendell Berry, and not Walter Mosley or Amy Tan or Tom Robbins or Gwendolyn Brooks or Joan Didion, all of whom write with loving detail about specific urban areas. Given the nation’s expanding population, a regional writer interested in capturing the texture of contemporary existence would be hard put *not*

to address some aspect of urban life, even if not necessarily the life of a congested metropolis. Most regional writers are likely to alternate between the city and the country, often in the same story or poem. The work of Southern writers like Doris Betts, Jill McCorkle, Kaye Gibbons, Lee Smith, Larry Brown, and Reynolds Price often shuttles between rural and metropolitan settings and between the Old and New South. (Some, like Betts in her novels *Heading West* [1981] and *The Sharp Teeth of Love* [1997], also write about regions other than the South: a kind of transregional cross-pollination that deserves to be more widely studied.) The novelist Jon Hassler, the essayist Scott Russell Sanders, and the poet Ted Kooser have all produced significant bodies of Midwestern writing. While all grounded in rural areas, they are as likely to set their work in a leafy college town as in a wetland or a limestone quarry. The urban/rural distinction seems less and less crucial to much contemporary regionalism. Jane Hamilton's engaging novel, *A Map of the World* (1994), should quiet the voice of skeptics who think that serious fiction cannot be written today about agrarian life in Midwestern "fly-over" country. Maxine Hong Kingston's novel *Tripmaster Monkey* (1989) might counter the charge that urban fiction cannot somehow be "regional." Kingston's protagonist, the fifth-generation Chinese American Wittman Ah Sing (whose name slyly alludes to "Song of Myself"), embodies an ironic trans-Pacific consciousness that mixes Rilke, Kerouac, and Chinese legends of the Monkey King, none of them out of place on the foggy streets of San Francisco. Ana Castillo, for her part, writes with equal adeptness about Mexican Americans both in Chicago, in *Peel My Love like an Onion* (1999), and in sleepy hamlets in New Mexico (*So Far From God*), where a young girl can fly up onto a church roof and, in the words of Castillo's narrator, "nobody could say nothing about it" (Castillo 1993: 21).

Yet despite this greater inclusiveness in contemporary American regionalism, there is still often an undeniable thread of antimodernist (or antipostmodernist) recoil in much contemporary regional writing. Urban and suburban America, as glimpsed through a regional lens, often looks increasingly bland, intolerant, unhealthy, and consumer-oriented. As William Bevis has noted about the West, the rootedness and uniqueness of rural places in many Western works – particularly those by Native Americans and dry-land realists – are often set against a mainstream culture of individualism, freedom, mobility, and interchangeability that Bevis calls "liquidity." In American culture, liquidity often takes shape as "freedom in the form of license, the right to do anything one wishes, free of background, race, kinship, place, and fate" (Bevis 1996: 31). Certain Western writers remind us, as Bevis says, that the antiprogressive aspects of the West have not always been "primitivist, nostalgic, or anti-civilization." Rather, they often originate in "marginal but informed cultural points of view" (Bevis 1996: 35) that show the problems of capitalist modernity to be not only problems of multinational corporations and global profits, but problems of identity that arise from conflicting conceptions of the self.

One could do worse, in reaching for a fresh understanding of contemporary regionalism, than to look at a tribal map of the state perhaps most associated with rootlessness, transience, and unchecked growth: California (see figure 1.1). The general



Figure 1.1 Map of Native California. From Malcolm Margolin, *California Indian Stories, Songs and Reminiscences*.

public's relative unfamiliarity with California tribes helps make this an eye-opening revelation. The twisting boundaries of tribal units are provisional demarcations determined by language, culture, and natural features rather than by abstract governmental designations: the whole is a loose confederacy of biocultural locales. The value of learning to envision California this way is not to satisfy a primitivist longing for prelapsarian images of a Native American "harmony with nature." Native Californians use chainsaws and food processors to prepare for traditional ceremonies, and Greg Sarris, in his fine memoir of the renowned Cache Creek Pomo basketweaver and medicine woman, *Mabel McKay: Weaving the Dream* (1994), recounts an incident at Stanford University when a student asked Mabel, in an auditorium where she was being interviewed as a native healer, "What do you do for poison oak?" "Calamine lotion," she replied, with no hint of sarcasm (1994: 1).

The value of visualizing California not as a single entity but as a mosaic of interdependent, interlocking microregions, each with its distinctive landforms, climate zones, history, and blendings of culture, is that it brings the true richness of the state into sharper clarity. The historical and biological continuum within which to imagine California widens, not in spite of but because of the particularities of individual places. The more carefully we train ourselves to superimpose California's human history and culture onto its natural history, like overlaid transparencies, the more likely we are to approximate the imaginative equivalent of deep focus in film. An awareness of "place" as a living, interactive force in human identity helps create a more richly textured and multilayered sense of volume and depth in any region's history and art.

Visualizations of place that frequently use natural features rather than recently imposed political demarcations are a central element of a contemporary environmental movement called bioregionalism. Bioregionalism emphasizes the fact that human behavior and ethical deliberation take place within the context of local communities, both human and biotic. Individuals and communities, in such a view, come into consciousness *through*, not apart from, the natural environments they inhabit. Bioregional definitions of healthy communities rely on downsized ecological systems and local relationships with the land, seeing identity as bound up in a specific terrain defined by natural boundaries rather than abstract governmental designations.

As Kirkpatrick Sale puts it in explaining the ethics of environmental action in *Dwellers in the Land*, "The issue is not one of morality . . . but of *scale*" (1985: 53). The optimal scale at which ecological consciousness and healthy human communities can be developed, Sale argues, is the bioregional. The earth is organized, he asserts, not into artificial states but into natural areas, or bioregions, that are defined by "particular attributes of flora, fauna, water, climate, soils, and landforms, and by the human settlements and cultures those attributes have given rise to" (Sale 1985: 55). Sale quickly adds that the borders of bioregions are inevitably indistinct and interpenetrating. Bioregions "are not only of different sizes but often can be seen to be like Chinese boxes, one within another [morphoregions within georegions within eco-regions], forming a complex arrangement from the largest to the smallest, depending

upon which natural characteristics are dominant" (1985: 56). Bioregionalists generally seek to stress not the common qualities of American places but the distinctive ones, the aspects of local identity taken to be most indelible and unreproducible elsewhere. They are particularly wary of what Wendell Berry calls "a regionalism of the mind" (1990: 81), one which can result in "a map without a territory" (1990: 82), a literature of place without a place – in a physical sense – to evoke.

Bioregional "mappings" of local environments have increasingly involved an interest in metaphors of depth, layering, resonance, root systems, habitats, and interconnectedness – factors that not only connect different aspects of a place but seem to put them into motion, making them move within their own history (both human and nonhuman). The effect, as Patricia Hampl puts it, is to pitch us harder into the landscape: "There is no forest, but there is the sensation that now we're going deeper. The *deeper* of characters in fairy tales who set off from home and, sooner or later, must enter a deep wood" (Hampl 1987: 40).

Barry Lopez's exploration of Arctic tundras and icefloes in *Arctic Dreams* (1986); Linda Hasselstrom's writings from the ranches and coffee shops in the interior of the American West, *Land Circle* (1991); Wendell Berry's profusion of essays, poetry, and fiction from his Kentucky hill farm; Terry Tempest Williams's account of birdlife and self-healing at the Great Salt Lake, *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (1991), and her explorations of eroticism in the canyon country of Southern Utah, *Desert Quartet* (1995); John McPhee's geological tetralogy (*Basin and Range* [1981], *In Suspect Terrain* [1983], *Rising From the Plains* [1986], and *Assembling California* [1993]); John Hanson Mitchell's explorations of "deep time" in patches of remnant countryside outside Boston in *Ceremonial Time* (1984) and *Living at the End of Time* (1990); Keith Basso's masterly exposition of landscape and language among the Western Apache *Wisdom Sits in Places* (1996); David Rains Wallace's meditations on myth and evolution in *The Klamath Knot* (1983) or his description of a unique area of Florida woodlands in *Bulow Hammock: Mind in a Forest* (1988); William Least Heat-Moon's *Prairy-Erth* (1991), a 600-page exploration of a single county of tall-grass prairie in the Kansas Flint Hills; Rick Bass's description of land conservation efforts in the far northwestern corner of Montana in *The Book of Yaak* (1996); Gary Nabhan's southwestern ethnobotanical studies in *The Desert Smells Like Rain* (1982) – the sense of place that emerges from these and dozens of other contemporary works that might be termed bioregional is informed by an ecological understanding of the interdependence, interconnectedness, and adaptation of all living systems. Bioregional writers picture specific localities as complex, multilayered palimpsests of geology, meteorology, history, myth, etymology, family genealogy, agricultural practice, storytelling, and regional folk ways.

Bioregional writing offers a multidimensional vision of identity and landscape. It does not imagine "place" in literature as a conceptual index of social attitudes, or a receding backdrop for the actions of isolated selves in the foreground, but rather as a form of depth perception. Less a formalized movement in recent American writing than an impulse or a turn of mind, bioregionalism represents, in Gary Snyder's

words, “the entry of place into the dialectic of history” – but not “place” defined in exclusively human terms. “We might say,” Snyder asserts, “that there are ‘classes’ which have so far been overlooked – the animals, rivers, rocks, and grasses – now entering history” (Snyder 1990: 41).

Replacing larger, more homogeneous entities (whether states or regions) with the more flexibly defined microregions that bioregional writers propose might seem a form of Balkanization to some, a form of fashionable fragmentation in imagining the self. Strangely enough, the opposite seems to be the case, at least insofar as a contemporary literature of place implicitly testifies. Imagining “deep maps” of smaller, more specific places actually offers what W. J. Keith calls “a welcome limitation of possibility” (1988: 10), one that allows for a richer understanding of individual wholeness – one, in Hampl’s words, that feels like sanity. The most compelling bioregional works attempt to establish imaginative title to specific American places, to reimagine a numinous landscape beneath a desacralized, irradiated, and overdeveloped one. One of the most ambitious of these is Snyder’s book-length poem, *Mountains and Rivers without End*. Forty years in the making, the poem is an exploration of whether it is possible to imagine a bioregional vision of the planet, with various places in the American West connected – like images in an East Asian painter’s hand scroll – to sites in Japan, Australia, China, and Taiwan: all of them linked by “the dynamics of mountain uplift, subduction, erosion, and the planetary water cycle” (Snyder 1996: 155).

Snyder’s multifaceted interests in Buddhism, plate tectonics, Japanese Noh drama, and calligraphy offer an apt example of the blending of science, art, and spirituality in the bioregional imagination. They also reveal the increasing cultural eclecticism of American regional writing, which now often embodies a hybrid collage of multiple voices, memories, and cross-cultural exchange. There has been a healthy and long overdue recognition that every region of the United States is criss-crossed by vectors of inward and outward migration. Every area of the country teems with the historical and cultural “footprints” of multiple populations (some recent, many long-established over generations). As the Chicano playwright and film-maker Luis Valdez puts it, “we must cross the ‘T,’ we must square the circle, in order to understand who it is we are” (1990: 169). Writers and scholars now find it more difficult to characterize something as large as, say, “the Mind of the South” and tend to focus on what Krista Comer calls “competing geographical and historical imaginations” (1999: ix) of a given place. Works like Victor Villaseñor’s epic family chronicle, *Rain of Gold* (1991), the poetry of New Mexico native Simon Ortiz (Acoma Pueblo), and the play *Tea* (1987) by Velina Hasu Houston (who is of mixed Japanese, African-American, and Native American ancestry), a work which explores the lives of Japanese “war brides” who settled after World War II with their ex-GI husbands in rural Kansas, all demonstrate how many regional writers stretch out to non-European cultures, via bloodlines and cultural affiliations, in imagining their local places. These writers negotiate bicultural, even tricultural identities in locating themselves and their characters. Many create what might be called “placed” evocations of displacement:

dramatizations of cultural disorientation, cultural vertigo, or deracinated yearnings for distant places or the lost comfort of traditional ways. Their works often powerfully remind readers that culture shock can be experienced at home as well as abroad.

Biologists, ethnobotanists, and environmental historians have altered our notion that the American wilderness was pristine and untouched prior to the arrival of European settlers. Lands once thought of as unaltered by human culture have now been shown to reveal complex signs of early indigenous agriculture and land management. Similarly, many authors have re-imagined aspects of the regional past that have deepened our understanding of regional society and culture. Some of these – for instance, William Kennedy’s Albany cycle (*The Ink Truck* [1969], *Legs* [1975], *Billy Phelan’s Greatest Game* [1978], *Ironweed* [1983], and *Quinn’s book* [1988]), Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead* (1991), Charles Frazier’s *Cold Mountain* (1997), and David Guterson’s *Snow Falling on Cedars* (1995) – have received widespread, often award-winning attention. But other, less well-known works deserve equal consideration. Andrew Hudgins’s book-length narrative poem, *After the Lost War* (1988), vividly re-imagines the life of nineteenth-century poet Sidney Lanier; Shannon Applegate relates the history and lore of her Oregon pioneer family in *Skookum* (1988); Jonathan Raban explores the lives of early twentieth-century homesteaders in the Dakotas and eastern Montana in *Bad Land* (1996); Larry Watson explores some of the same territory in his Montana trilogy, which begins with the novel *Montana 1948* (1993); James D. Houston chronicles the life of Patty Reed, a member of the Donner Party of 1846, in his novel *Snow Mountain Passage* (2001); Peter Matthiessen dramatizes the life of an early twentieth-century outlaw entrepreneur in the Florida Everglades in *Killing Mr. Watson* (1991); Frank Chin re-imagines the building of the Transcontinental Railroad through the eyes of a young Chinese-American boy in San Francisco in his coming-of-age novel *Donald Duk* (1991); and Patricia Hampl’s *Spillville* (1987) pays lyrical tribute to Czech composer Antonin Dvorak’s 1893 summer stay in a wedge of farm and forest in northeastern Iowa, sometimes called Little Switzerland.

In addition to these renderings of regional history, anyone interested in the true scope of contemporary regionalism should also sample the explosion of literary non-fiction that deals with place, in memoir, autobiography, and personal narrative. The recent outpouring of American memoirs and autobiographies is a larger, national phenomenon having to do with the popularity of literary nonfiction, and not all of this writing focuses on place; but much of it does, providing fresh new understandings of what it means to dwell, or have dwelt, in specific places, for varying lengths of time. Dan Duane’s account of a surfer’s year on the central California coast in *Caught Inside* (1996); Larry McMurtry’s account of his ambivalent love affair with Texas in *Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen* (1999); Tim McLaurin’s account of growing up in North Carolina, *Keeper of the Moon* (1991); Kathleen Norris’s portrait of life on the high plains in *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* (1993); Verlyn Klinkenborg’s agrarian adventures in *Making Hay* (1986); Bobbie Ann Mason’s memoir of her Kentucky childhood in *Clear Springs* (1999); Western ranch narratives like Mary Clearman

Blew's *All But the Waltz* (1991) and William Kittredge's *Hole in the Sky* (1992); Bill Holm's tribute to his home town in *The Heart Can Be Filled Anywhere on Earth: Minneota, Minnesota* (1996); Eudora Welty's autobiographical musings in *One Writer's Beginnings* (1984); James Galvin's lyrical delving into the history of a postage-stamp pasture on the Colorado/Wyoming border in *The Meadow* (1993); Henry Louis Gates's remembrances of growing up in the "segregated peace" of Piedmont, West Virginia, in *Colored People* (1994); Jane Brox's account of living on her family farm in the Merrimack Valley in Massachusetts in *Here and Nowhere Else* (1995); Darryl Babe Wilson's memoir of growing up with the Achumawe and Atsugewi Indians in northeastern California in *The Morning the Sun Went Down* (1998); Paul Gruchow's collection of Minnesota memories in *Grass Roots: The Universe of Home* (1995); and Luis Rodriguez's account of growing up amidst the gang warfare of East Los Angeles in *Always Running* (1993): these and dozens of other personal narratives are infused with the sometimes tender, sometimes harrowing details that help create the patchwork quilt of local places that makes up contemporary regionalism.

One other form of literary nonfiction – travel writing – also deserves mention here. At least since Henry David Thoreau's exploration and mapping of his own backyard, American travel writing has been intimately tied to the literature of place. While travel narratives are not "regional" in the sense of springing from extended residence in a place, and while their authors have sometimes been disparaged (in W. E. B. DuBois' memorable phrase) as "car window sociologists" (quoted in Rampersad 1990: 25), contemporary travel writing about the United States has nevertheless resulted in some remarkable accounts of regional landscapes and cultures. The extraordinary success of William Least Heat-Moon's account of his backroads circuit of the country in *Blue Highways* (1982) helped create the sense that much of the rural landscape and history of the United States had been lost on the American public, and that, in Heat-Moon's words, if a traveler but has the perception, he can become "a *perpetual* stranger in a strange land" (1992: 21, emphasis in original). Jonathan Raban's trip down the Mississippi in a 16-foot aluminum boat in *Old Glory* (1981); Eddy Harris's report of what the same trip was like for a young African American in *Mississippi Solo* (1988), followed by his motorcycle tour of the South in *South of Haunted Dreams* (1993); Douglas Brinkley's rollicking account of taking college students around the country for an on-the-road exploration of American history in *The Majic Bus: An American Odyssey* (1993); Mary Morris's description of wandering through the New Age groups of southern California in *Angels and Aliens* (1999); Charles Bowden's explorations of the Santa Catalina Mountains in Arizona in *Frog Mountain Blues* (1994); Kent Nerburn's journeys along the Pacific Coast highway in *Road Angels* (2001); Dayton Duncan's renderings of the American West in *Out West* (1987) and *Miles from Nowhere* (1993); Joan Didion's portrait of urban tension, fast money, and the center of Cuban exile in *Miami* (1987); Thurston Clarke's journeys along earthquake rifts in *California Fault* (1996); Kenneth Lincoln and Al Logan Slagle's journeys through Native America in *The Good Red Road* (1987); Linda Niemann's railroad memoir, *Boomer* (1990); Sallie Tisdale's search for "home" in the Pacific

Northwest, in *Stepping Westward* (1991); Heat-Moon's chronicle of his trip across America by boat in *River-Horse* (1999); Tim Palmer's exploration of American waterways, from the Penobscot to the Sheenjek, in *America by Rivers* (1996): these and other recent travel narratives bear alternately marveling and cranky witness to the prodigal variety of contemporary regionalism.

Writers have not always been anxious to be thought of as "regional writers," not least because that tag has often denoted small-press status and the chance of only local, sometimes uncritical, recognition. "Regional fiction at its best" is a blurb emblazoned on any number of remaindered novels. Many regional writers have an animating ambivalence about being considered "Western" or "Southern" or "Mid-western," because while they may believe that regional identity and a sense of place can crucially shape and inform a writer's sensibilities, they are wary of notions of geographical determinism. Regional identity is something that a number of writers try somehow to both embody and escape. Also, an intimate connection between landscape and writing can sometimes be more a wished-for condition than an actuality, and it is not always clear what kind of causal relationship can be established between the two.

When remembering her childhood in northern Idaho, Marilynne Robinson says she preferred old, thick, dull, and hard books that had nothing Western about them – books about "Constantinople and the Cromwell revolution and chivalry." "Relevance was precisely not an issue for me. I looked to Galilee for meaning and to Spokane for orthodonture, and beyond that the world where I was I found entirely sufficient" (Robinson 1993: 165). "Do you feel a strong sense of connectedness between yourself and the land?" an interviewer once asked Robinson. "Less than I wish I did," she replied, "but that's often the way it is. You imagine what it would be like if you felt the way you wished you did feel, and that becomes a sort of feeling in itself" (Robinson 1987: 229). Yet, as many readers know, Robinson's novel *Housekeeping* (1980) is one of the most richly rendered regional works of the last two decades. Not knowing what kind of link can be established between self and environment is clearly not the same as asserting that there is nothing there to be known.

"The idea that [one's] style is rooted to the landscape just sounds sort of quaint to me," the poet William Stafford once remarked (1987: 236). "Our country is so fluid for travel and access that a regional recognition is more a matter of convenience than it is any kind of valid movement" (1993: 65). In discussing the importance of natural sounds in his poetry, however, Stafford mentions precisely the kind of detail regional writers often evoke: "there is a mossy, deadened sound here [in the Northwest]. So you listen more carefully: you're an owl. You don't have to put on earmuffs to keep from damaging your hearing. It's nice and quiet, so you listen . . ." (1993: 68). Literary critics (like myself) who wish to show that region and "place" are important – even crucially formative – elements of a writer's sensibility sometimes skip over remarks like Stafford's disavowal of "quaintness" and look for places where writers say their writing has been influenced by landscape and local communities. But if we are not careful, we may do at least two kinds of disservice to Stafford, Robinson, and

other authors. First, we ignore or downplay the fact that many regional writers do not consider their writing “regional,” at least not unequivocally so; and second, we may miss some of the nuances of how a regional writer’s understanding of “place” might actually manifest itself in language and in his or her verbal imagination.

Stafford actually *does* suggest – as in his remark about the “mossy, deadened sound” of the Northwest – that the sensory texture of a region may somehow be capable of getting into a writer’s nervous system or into his verbal temperament. But he tends to suggest this deflectingly, by indirection and with humor. “My attitude is this,” he says in an interview conducted in Portland: “where you live is not crucial, but how you *feel* about where you live is crucial. . . . In some ways, let me say, the most minimal scenery is my kind of scenery. This [Portland] is too busy a place. I stand it very well. It doesn’t make me nervous. It’s just that it’s superfluous. Any Kansan knows that Oregon is a little too lavish” (Stafford 1987: 235). If there is a unity to Northwest writing, Stafford says, it is attributable less to “scenery and a mystique” and more to the kind of company writers keep. “If Theodore Roethke hadn’t moved to Seattle,” Stafford says, “the scene would be the same, but the literary scene wouldn’t be the same. I think he had a great effect on that. But I hit all that too late for it to do anything to me. I was already an Osage orange, hedgewood Kansan” (1987: 236). Stafford’s logic is elfishly circular here. Landscape doesn’t influence writing, the argument goes, *writers* do; but I’m too much a product of my landscape (a Kansan) to have it affect me. I’m too serious to be anything but playful, Robert Frost once said, and we might adapt the phrase in Stafford’s case. Region and place may be too indelible to lend themselves to direct statements or to social movements. Having self-doubts about the possibility of adequately conveying a sense of regional identity is not the same as asserting that it does not exist.

Flannery O’Connor, prescient as always, said as much in 1963, in an essay entitled “The Regional Writer.” “I have a friend from Wisconsin who moved to Atlanta recently and was sold a house in the suburbs. The man who sold it to her was himself from Massachusetts, and he recommended the property by saying, ‘You’ll like this neighborhood. There’s not a Southerner for two miles’” (O’Connor 1969: 56–7). “At least we can be identified when we do occur,” O’Connor added. The prospect of regional identity at the time was not encouraging:

The present state of the South is one wherein nothing can be taken for granted, one in which our identity is obscured and in doubt. . . . It is not a matter of so-called local color, it is not a matter of losing our peculiar quaintness. Southern identity is not really connected with mocking-birds and beaten biscuits and white columns any more than it is with hookworm and bare feet and muddy clay roads. Nor is it necessarily shown forth in the antics of our politicians. . . . An identity is not to be found on the surface; it is not accessible to the poll-taker; it is not something that *can* become a cliché. . . . It is not made from what passes, but from those qualities that endure, regardless of what passes, because they are related to truth. It lies very deep. In its entirety, it is known only to God, but of those who look for it, none gets so close as the artist. (O’Connor 1969: 57–8)

Some forty years later, O'Connor's double vision seems more pertinent than ever: Never underestimate the American penchant for attempting to turn *everything* into a cliché or into a "memorized landscape." But, by the same token, never underestimate the willingness of American writers to stand their ground against that impulse. Regional authors continue to send their verbal imaginations into the vortex of contemporary life, and they continue to return and to speak of what endures: one neighborhood, one river basin, one metropolis, one region at a time.

NOTES

- 1 See "Survey: Californians believe sharing stories strengthens community" (June 15, 2001), <http://www.thinkcalifornia.net/news/>.
- 2 See my review of *Close Range* in "Losing Our Place: An Essay Review," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 40: 1 (Winter 2001), 242–56.

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