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Book Review: A Companion to the Regional Literatures of America

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What difference would it make if literary regionalism were taken seriously? We would have an ambitious, readable collection of essays, written by well-known scholars, that would critique as well as defend regional literary movements, re-examine the social implications of local-color and Depression-era regionalism, trace the shifting borders of regionalism's connections with nationalism, study regional issues not only in narratives of village and countryside but also in Gidget novels and L.A. detective stories, and use current theories to recontextualize past work and predict the future. Here is that collection.

Part 1 contains eleven thought-provoking arguments that re-examine assumptions about regional literature and provide historical and contemporary context. The first two essays set the tone. Michael Kowalewski represents "the prodigious variety of contemporary regionalism" by surveying genres, approaches, controversies, movements—and hundreds of individual titles. Stephanie Foote examines the cultural work performed by regional writing and the ways it "illuminates the often contradictory meanings of the local." Subsequent chapters attend to such topics as feminist regionalism, the city as region, regionalism and ecology, American Indians and place, trans-American and transnational regionalisms, and "the mutual construction of region and race."

Although part 1 is the groundbreaking section, part 2, "Mapping Regions," is the heart of the book. From New England to Hawaii, American literary regions are represented in fifteen chapters that serve well as "companions": they suggest titles and place them in context, introduce important issues, and provide strong mentorship for new readers of each regional literature. Reinforcing the volume's emphasis on the multiplicity of regional visions, these essays vary widely in scope. Lawrence Berkove's "The Sagebrush School Revived" focuses on a few writers in Virginia City, Nevada, during the heyday of the Comstock. In contrast, Diane Quantic's contribution surveys the history and vast expanse of "The Great Plains," touching on hundreds of titles while spotlighting such touchstones as Rölvaag and Wright Morris. Expanding upon one of the volume's key assumptions—that "the writer is not only shaped by, but shapes, the land about which he or she writes" (Fine)—several authors examine "counter-narratives" to the dominant myths of some regions. Sara E. Gardner discusses literary critiques of the "Plantation School" popularized by Thomas Nelson Page, and Susan Kollin fea-
tures writers who have worked to “recast” the A. B. Guthrie “Big Sky tradition” of Montana. Part 2 provides opportunities to delve into one region’s works or wander broadly across the American literary landscape, noticing differences and interconnections among regions.

In part 3, five commentaries on individual authors provide a final layer to the volume’s complex and open-ended discussion of regional literature. Bret Harte, Willa Cather, Mark Twain, Mary Austin, and Wallace Stegner—all “regionalist masters”—do not fit within any narrow definition of region; Cather and Twain, for example, attend closely to several regions, and Stegner writes “from a worldview... at once Western, American, and continental” (Cracroft). Nevertheless, as contributor Robert Thacker says of Cather, such writers create “stories [that]... cannot be understood apart from their places.” A dynamic understanding of these places and of how they are culturally (and literarily) constituted emerges from this important book.

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