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Book Review: Writing Out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture

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Writing Out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture. By Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003. 422 pp. Notes, works cited, index. \$44.95 cloth, \$20.00 paper.

Although it has everything to do with location, nineteenth-century American literary regionalism is not “about” natural geographic boundaries, according to Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse. That is, issues of vantage point, marginalization, and gender and racial positioning are crucial to this literature, and the lens of feminist standpoint theory brings it sharply into focus. In contrast, the habit of categorizing by setting—Sarah Orne Jewett and the Maine coast or Mary Austin in the California

desert—suggests geographic determinism and distracts us from what these writers might have in common: regionalism as “a discourse or a mode of analysis” and “a location for critique and resistance.” Once we understand this, we can define nineteenth-century regionalism more meaningfully, read regionalist works more knowledgeably, and see their political and philosophical implications more clearly. To support their argument, Fetterley and Pryse draw on decades of work in feminist criticism and American literary regionalism. The result is an important, thought-provoking book that challenges readers to re-examine values and ways of reading that have dominated the field of American literature. So-called “minor literatures” are vital because they “can offer alternative ways of knowing that ‘take place,’ become located or regionalized, in the gaps within ideology.”

A carefully planned course of study as well as a polemic, *Writing Out of Place* serves as a companion to Fetterley and Pryse’s *American Women Regionalists 1850-1910* (1992), an anthology that first made readily available to students a body of sketches, short stories, and novel excerpts ranging from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s “Uncle Lot” to Willa Cather’s “Old Mrs. Harris.” Pryse and Fetterley deftly place women writers at the center of the “alternative vision” of regionalism and call into question the dominant tradition of masculinist American literary studies that, until recently, elevated realism and naturalism over regionalism and considered misogynist, racist “southwest humor” more worthy of undergraduate study than the work of regional women writers. For Fetterley and Pryse, works that “adopt a regional setting” are not regionalist unless they “explore questions of region,” including ideological contradictions and issues of gender or race. Thus, writers like Bret Harte, Hamlin Garland, and Mark Twain are marginal to regionalism. So are local colorists, who turn local place into a commodity and represent regional characters as strange and exotic.

This eleven-chapter book is organized according to “the critical and theoretical problems

that the texts of regionalism considered as a group pose for and beyond literary study." The early chapters focus on literary issues like the form (the "sketch"), poetics ("empathic narration"), and thematics ("free to say") characteristic of regionalist fiction. Later chapters deal with feminist epistemology, race and class, queer theory, and empathetic reading. Readers can—with the authors' encouragement—dip into the book at nearly any place, using the index to locate excellent close readings of specific works or the table of contents and other guideposts to locate the issues they wish to pursue. Readers with experience of the canon wars, American literature in the academy, second-wave feminist literary criticism, and Fetterley's and Pryse's earlier work will find much familiar ground here and should be interested to see how skillfully the authors have advanced their thesis by extending these discourses and combining them with their own attentive reading of marginalized works.

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