A COMPANION TO

THE REGIONAL LITERATURES OF AMERICA

EDITED BY CHARLES L. CROW
A Companion to the Regional Literatures of America
This series offers comprehensive, newly written surveys of key periods and movements, and certain major authors, in English literary culture and history. Extensive volumes provide new perspectives and positions on contexts and on canonical and post-canonical texts, orientating the beginning student in new fields of study and providing the experienced undergraduate and new graduate with current and new directions, as pioneered and developed by leading scholars in the field.

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Acknowledgments

The editor’s greatest debt is to the community of scholars who created these chapters. He would also like to recognize helpful suggestions from Sandra Zagarell, Melody Graulich, and Chad Rohman.

The book and its editor benefited from the encouragement, good judgment, and patience of Andrew McNeillie, Emma Bennett, and Alison Dunnett at Blackwell.

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Figure 12.1: Actor Joshua Silsbee as the Yankee character Jonathan Ploughboy in Samuel Woodworth’s The Forest Rose. Courtesy of the Harvard Theater Collection, the Houghton Library, Harvard University.

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Figure 31.1: Photograph of Wallace Stegner. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of Mary Stegner.

Figure 31.2: "Writing class meeting at Wallace Stegner’s house, about 1958," by John C. Lawrence. Courtesy of Mary Stegner.
This Blackwell Companion reveals the rich heritage of regional literatures in the United States. Our goal is twofold: to show the scope and history of regional literatures, and to understand their importance, as revealed by several theoretical approaches.

Regional literatures usually have been undervalued by literary historians, and by university textbooks and courses, until recently. Two trends have altered this situation. The first, born in the marketplace, is the spectacular appeal to readers today of books with a regional emphasis. As our first chapter will discuss in detail, bookstores today are filled with acclaimed and bestselling books from authors like Cormac McCarthy, Charles Frazier, E. Annie Proulx, Barbara Kingsolver, and many others, that are deeply grounded in local culture and landscape. In an age of corporate-produced mass culture, of identical shopping malls and fast-food restaurants, regionalism has staged a defiant comeback.

The second trend, born in the academy, is the re-evaluation of the canon of American literature. This process began as long ago as the 1960s (when so many important changes began), unearthed many lost or undervalued authors, and overturned many of the assumptions by which we once judged literary texts. Among the baggage of the old orthodoxy was the assumption that regional writing was inherently minor, an art of the miniature, the commonplace, the local, and often the feminine. The term “local color” was used dismissively, as a diminutive, in contrast to works embodying the big slam-bang national themes of exploration, adventure, and conquest. Through the lively discussions of the sixties and seventies, these positions became increasingly difficult to maintain. Feminist scholars, especially, challenged the belief that the literature of “small and private lives” was necessarily less important than stories about seafaring or fighting Indians. Regional writers of manifestly superior quality, like Kate Chopin, were rescued from obscurity. By the 1990s, Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse had defined a tradition of “women’s regional realism” extending from Harriet Beecher Stowe through Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman to Mary Austin and Willa Cather. Fetterley and Pryse, in their introduction to American...
Women Regionalists, 1850–1910 (1992) defined common interests and themes shared by these writers, and raised awareness of their artistic achievement. Some scholars suggested later that Fetterley and Pryse paid too little attention to the respective regional concerns of their regionalists, made them seem too much alike, and ignored their interaction with other authors and traditions. Whatever the merit of these objections, the work of Fetterley and Pryse opened the way for a resurgence of scholarship on regional literatures, and its importance cannot be overstated.

As a result of these debates of the last few decades, we now better understand the achievements of regionalist authors, and the importance of the traditions in which they wrote. Indeed, it is difficult to understand the large issues of American culture and literature, we can now assert, without understanding the literature of regions. Thus, while the chapters of this book are devoted to sections of the country, the reader will recognize the major problems and concerns of national history: slavery, sectional rivalries, the place of indigenous people, the natural landscape, the meaning of frontier experience, the rise of cities, progress and change, women’s rights. At the same time, as we will see, the regional approach offers unique insights, and at times even challenges the wisdom of studying literature packaged according to nation-states. Is there really an American literature, or is there only a collection of regional literatures? And do these literatures always stop at national borders?

“Regional literature,” as used here, is a very large and inclusive term. We are concerned with regions before the existence of the nation, from early attempts by colonists to describe their lives in a new place, with literatures of new regions as the country moved west, and with stories of those the settlers displaced. We include the tradition of women’s regionalism defined by Fetterley and Pryse, the rowdy masculine humor of the Old Southwest, the literature of cities and small towns and farms and wilderness. We move through the realistic movement, which was largely defined by regionalist writers, into and through the twentieth century.

Readers of this Companion will encounter familiar and famous names, as well as many new writers they may wish to read for the first time, and will learn of histories and traditions from many regions.

Our book is divided into three parts. The eleven chapters of part I are designed to show several theoretical approaches to our subject, and to indicate how the concepts of region and regional literatures have changed over time. A key issue, which runs throughout the book, is introduced in the second chapter. What is the “cultural work” that is performed by regional literatures? What does such writing do within our evolving national experience? The folk ways of a region are often described in texts which are read, or consumed, by members of another, dominant class. Is this commodification of regional culture inherently demeaning or condescending, reducing it to the quaint and picturesque, like souvenir snapshots of summer vacations in the mountains or at the seashore? A related question concerns the issue of nostalgia in regional literature. Do pictures of simple life in Maine fishing villages, Midwestern small towns, or (an even more challenging instance) antebellum Southern plantations pander to the reader’s desire to escape to an imagined simpler time? And, if so, is
this always wrong? Or, on the contrary, can the perspective of a region offer a useful minority view, a healthy subversion, of dominant values?

Other chapters in part I will develop this question of cultural work in various ways. The “work” of region often involves both place and race, and race may be the key issue of American life, as important as class is in Britain. Regional writers make implicit claims about the region as a homeland to the peoples within it. Much regionalism is the story of colonial peoples learning to regard themselves as native to a place. As we would expect, the original native peoples have found ways to write back, to place themselves again in the landscape through their own literatures (see chapter 10). Much of the literature of the South, especially, is a continuing debate over the relationship of several cultures to the place, and the legitimacy of the stories they have written of their lives there.

Inherently, regional literature is placed at the intersection of human culture and natural landscape. People define this relationship through lines drawn by surveyors and politicians, through laws and texts, and through social and personal histories. These human constructions often fit imperfectly with the watersheds, shorelines, and ecological systems of the landscape. Repeatedly in part I, and in later chapters as well, our writers use the key terms “borders” and “boundaries” in discussing this relationship of people and place. Chapter 3 asks us to replace the powerful myth of the frontier, a westward-moving line of settlement, with a regional approach, in which we consider particular regions and and the interaction of cultures within them. Chapters 7 and 11 both ask us to consider ways in which cultures cross borders (as will some essays in part II, especially chapter 13); chapter 7 also brings the study of region into contemporary suburban culture, and, like several of these chapters, uses tools of contemporary feminist theory. Chapters 8 and 9 study the literature of ecology and the literature of the city (the latter usually invisible to the regional approach).

Part II, the largest section of the book, is a survey of several of the regional literatures of the United States. No such survey can ever claim to be complete, since it is always possible for a region to be subdivided or defined in an alternative way. Nonetheless, the fifteen chapters in this section provide a very full survey of the regions of the country and their respective literary histories. As would be expected, there is careful treatment of regions long recognized for their literary traditions, such as the South and New England; but the Old Northwest, a region whose identity has faded over time, is also represented. The Great Plains, the Southwest, the Rocky Mountain West, and California, which from an Eastern perspective might blur into one generalized West, are here separated into distinct regions requiring individual treatment. Likewise, the Pacific Northwest and Alaska are given a separate chapter, as is the state of Hawai‘i, often ignored or considered too foreign or exotic for discussion as an American region.

The final section, part III, presents studies of a small number of important regional authors. This list could be extended almost indefinitely, of course, and the section fill another volume. The five authors represented here – Bret Harte, Mark Twain,
Willa Cather, Mary Austin, and Wallace Stegner – were each important in defining and representing regions to American and world audiences. Harte began the craze for “local color” in the years immediately after the Civil War, and was for a time the most popular fiction writer in the English language. Mark Twain, his one-time friend, transformed American fiction through his close observation of place and regional language. Mary Austin and Willa Cather, each in her own way, brought the tradition of women’s regionalism into the twentieth century and (to use words handed like magical tokens from Sarah Orne Jewett to Cather) brought the parish to the world. Wallace Stegner not only was a masterful writer himself, a border-crosser grounded in the American and Canadian Wests, but through his creative writing classes at Stanford shaped generations of new regional writers. These five writers, then, are offered as specific and detailed studies of the issues raised and explored earlier in the book.

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The chapters in this Companion are all original work, except the pieces by Annette Kolodny and Vera M. Kutzinski, which were revised by the authors for inclusion here.
PART I
History and Theory of Regionalism in the United States
“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 Rölvaag than with the melodious ironies of Garrison Keillor’s radio shows on Lake Woebegon 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 Woebegon.

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,
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 antmythic 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 “hyper-capitalism,” 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