

POSTSCRIPT

Creole Adjudication

Governing New Orleans and Regional Provisionality
in the Long Nineteenth Century

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THE ETYMOLOGY OF the term “region” haunts as much as it animates the study of regionalism. Genealogies of the concept attest that at its root, it refers to a realm or “an administrative division; a subdivision of a larger geographical or political unit, for economic, administrative, or cultural purposes.”¹ “A region is a part of something beyond itself,” Sandra A. Zagarell reminds us, and it is often seen as subordinate to powers that penetrate and supersede it.² By this account, the region is a site of governability. Regions emerge as disciplinary units that lend themselves to their study and administration. We conceive of them conventionally as knowable communities predicated on personal immediacy rather than on abstract imaginary bonds. They are often deemed rural, premodern, or primordial spaces. Temporally, they can appear to be asynchronous with the urban and the modern even when incorporated within a larger political entity. In contrast to the dynamics of global and national forces, regions appear stable and manageable even when manipulated or threatened by powers that exist beyond them. The semantics of the region help account for its tenuous and often maligned place in U.S. literary studies. As a body of writing moored to static spaces of preservation, it presumably lacks the qualities associated with generative literary material: complexity, ambiguity, ambivalence, and formal richness.

Mapping Region in Early American Writing calls for a more capacious understanding of regionalism. The multiplicity of methods and objects of study in this collection testify to the many regionalisms that have shaped U.S. literature, culture, and politics in the early nineteenth century. But this richness itself reveals something about the quality of the region that has implications extending beyond the historical parameters of most of the preceding essays. In their introduction, Edward Watts and Keri Holt establish how mapping works as a fluid process: it creates fictional possibilities but also actual lines of geopolitical contest. As Watts

and Holt's invocation of David N. Cosgrove's theory of mapping illustrates, maps assume a set of spiritual and moral as well as political and cultural characteristics. Mapping, in other words, is an expansive concept coextensive but not always fully complicit with disciplinary division. While each contributor brings their own approaches to bear on the region, mapping emerges as our animating trope. Its function is not unlike that of the ship that has long organized the work of Atlantic studies scholarship. Mapping, as it is used in our collection, requires a different vocabulary for comparative studies attending to the relationships and rivalries among regions. One of this volume's imperatives is to free regional literary and cultural studies from the binaries that historically have defined the field. Rather than imagining regions locked into either serving or opposing a larger geopolitical body, such as a nation, an empire, or a market, we see them as entities embedded within a network of localities scattered across the globe. Nation-states or empires may seek to annex particular regions, but they forge lines of political and cultural exchange that exist beyond these claims. The contestability of their content and form creates occasions for the literary in the broadest sense: completely new kinds of social, economic, and political affiliations become imaginable that transform and are transformed by the spaces they inhabit and the other localities connected to them.

While an artificial conclusion cannot be imposed on an essay collection that includes as wide an array of methods and objects of study as *Mapping Region in Early American Writing*, all of the contributors to our volume essentially concur on two crucial points. First, individually and in the aggregate, these essays provide us with a compelling regionally attuned cultural history that cannot be so easily squared, as Duncan Faherty especially stresses in his examination of early nineteenth-century New York literature, with either older nationalist or more recent transatlantic models of study. Second, every contributor underscores the fluidity of regions, their literatures, and transnational networks. For all, what defines these spaces is not their stability but their contestability, or what I will refer to as their regional provisionality. Descriptive accounts of these places and the people that inhabit them attempt to achieve their disciplinary aims but do not necessarily do so. Local peoples may oppose the nations and empires that seek to subsume them, but regional writing registers other lines of antagonism among indigenous peoples, migrants, settlers, and conquerors, too. In the process, it imagines new forms of affiliation among local communities and literatures across the globe.³ Although this collection's essays focus predominately on pre-1860 literature and culture, their alternative understandings of regionalism and their recognition of regionalism's centrality to early U.S. literature and culture necessarily invite us to revisit the way we apprehend postbellum regionalism. The secessionist discourse of the 1850s may have organized the nation's regions into two ruling sectional nationalisms, but local color writers working at the end of the nineteenth century, in

fact, often directly drew on the antebellum writers, explorers, cartographers, and ethnographers that preceded them.

To chart this line of continuity between antebellum and postbellum regionalism in ways that mobilize this collection's operative concerns with mapping and regional contestability, I foreground one way of grappling with provisionality that surfaces throughout many of the preceding essays—even if it does not always figure centrally: legal regionalism. Specifically, I examine how Louisianan state law and literature envisaged regional affiliations across the globe that superseded those of the nation. The various economic, political, racial, and military conflicts borne out of the territorial disputes examined by many of the contributors to *Mapping Region in Early American Writing* had legal implications that extended well past the Civil War.

I specifically turn to George Washington Cable's writing on New Orleans as an instructive test case. In his work for the 1887 census and in his novel *The Grandissimes* (1880), Cable drew on early histories of the area to establish that the racial tensions and cultural challenges New Orleans faced in the years immediately after the Louisiana Purchase continued to haunt the city after Reconstruction. I maintain that Cable displays an acute awareness of the regional particularity of Louisiana's court system. Even as the state submitted to federal rule, its legal system remained Creolized insofar as it became the only state to base its court system on the Roman or civil-law practices of France and Spain rather than on the Anglo-Saxon common-law tradition that traced its roots back to England. Thus, while readers have long attended to the legal content of *The Grandissimes*, I am interested in how it uses civil legal logic to remedy the wrongs perpetrated in the text and to construct a narrative that romances neither sectionalism nor nationalism but imagines a translocal and more equitable Louisiana.

FROM PROVINCIAL TO PROVISIONAL REGIONALISM

The essays compiled for *Mapping Region in Early American Writing* address the challenge that everyone who studies local literatures of the long nineteenth century must tackle: how to prove that regions can be locally rooted without necessarily being homogeneous or culturally isolated. Regional fluidity has, in some measure, been addressed in previous scholarship on regionalism, but this collection extends and redirects this earlier work. Many of the contributors, for example, derive inspiration from Hsuan Hsu's idea of "regional production," which "involves not only the production of literature about regions but also the ways in which literary works 'produce,' reimagine, and actively restructure regional identities" in relation to larger national and global phenomena.⁴ Hsu's approach, however, is not without precedent. Stephanie Foote too treats regionalism as more of a process or as a strategy rather than as a genre "about the representation of difference," which shaped responses to the cultural and economic changes of the late nineteenth century.⁵ On