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Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, The New American Canon: The Iowa Series in Contemporary Literature and Culture, 2013

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ARTHUR, Jason, *Violet America: Regional Cosmopolitanism in U.S. Fiction since the Great Depression*, Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, The New American Canon: The Iowa Series in Contemporary Literature and Culture, 2013, 184 pages, ISBN: 978-1-60938-147-9, 39.95 dollars.

- 1 In the wake of such books as *Breaking Boundaries: New Perspectives on Women's Regional Writing* (edited by Sherrie A. Inness and Diana Royer, 1997) and *Writing Out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture* (Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse, 2003), Jason Arthur's *Violet America* (2013) starts out as an earnest attempt to debunk the widespread view of regional literature as a minor American tradition, questioning deeply-ingrained prejudices about literary regionalism. It seeks to deconstruct the scholarly trivialization of local color, proposing a view of regional texts as characterized by mobility, delocalization, and an awareness of the world at large, rather than stasis, rootedness, and provincialism.
- 2 As its oxymoronic title indicates, Arthur's study fuses, in a provoking and original way, regionalism and cosmopolitanism into a dialogic "violet zone" in between red, New-York-based East Coast America, and blue, San Francisco-based West Coast America. The book challenges the view of regional literature as a means of reinforcing polarization between local and global, margin and mainstream, poverty and privilege, moving regional texts toward a more integrative ideal of national being and belonging.

Through a four-part analysis of texts by James Agee, Jack Kerouac, Maxine Hong Kingston and Russell Banks, Arthur defines “regional cosmopolitanism” as a post-Depression mode of fiction blending the nation’s cultural polarities into a connected, interdependent America. Regional fiction is no longer seen as a 19th century museum or curio cabinet where quaint folks, picturesque scenery, and bygone traditions can be preserved and displayed to the public, but as a “literary register in which important conversations occur about the concentricity of the local, the national, and the global” (xii), as a laboratory of modernism and postmodernism where writers are more interested in “articulating commonalities across cultures than [...] [they are in] articulating differences” (xii).

- 3 Arthur attempts to show how cosmopolitanism and regionalism are not opposed but complementary terms, the universal always springing from specific ground, how in post-Depression literature, regional locales become the privileged civic or ideological sites of multicultural encounters and “the epicenters of global citizenship” (xvii). Arthur argues that in the modern world, culture and knowledge are on the side of “practices of everyday life” (to use the title of Michel de Certeau’s famous book), resisting the idea of a hegemonic central power often embodied in Arthur’s study as the New York trusteeship proudly regarding itself as the “Nation.” The main thesis of the book is that the reconciliatory, cosmopolitan vein of regional literature intent on redeeming provincial America without being too proud or nostalgic about it while engaging global ethic issues that revealed interregional similarities and values, was chiefly a post-Depression phenomenon.
- 4 To prove his point, Arthur examines modern texts that “represent the simultaneous presence of both rooted subjectivity and detached observation” (xx), the point of this simultaneity being “to make vivid the interdependence of each to the other” (xx). His challenge of the restrictive view of regional literature as dramatizing a hermetic series of fixed places or inland cultural deserts takes the form of four chapters following the progression of regional literature in a roughly chronological way, from the New Deal to the beginning of the 21st century.
- 5 In the first chapter, “Specific Soil: James Agee and the Poverty of Documentary Work,” which is probably the most convincing chapter of the entire study, Arthur analyzes Agee’s deep engagement with the specific soil of poverty in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) as a means of creating a satirical distance in the art of observing and documenting destitute, marginal America. Arthur argues that Agee opposes art as a sentimental or melodramatic activity freezing poverty in the public imagination, that his civic outlook contributes to redefining documentary art by drawing attention to the photographer’s and the writer’s own position and status as distanced, condescending observers. Agee’s “acknowledging his own [reflexivity] and his reader’s position in the production of knowledge about poverty is the heart of the book’s regional cosmopolitanism” (3).
- 6 The second chapter, “Pavement: Jack Kerouac and the Delocalization of America,” examines Kerouac’s shifting aesthetics between specific sites of America and transcontinental mobility, trying to demonstrate how Kerouac’s novels “simula[te] the unanchored experience of highway travel [...] [to] enact a form of national belonging that engages multiple American regions at once” (xxiii). Delocalization amounts to a mode of disorienting or depolarizing experience where regional spaces are no longer perceived as *loci* of poverty, but as forming “a network of interconnectedness between

poverty and privilege in America” (34). Arthur effectively shows how Kerouac questions the hierarchy of American places between rural regions and urbanized cosmopolitan centers on the East and West coasts.

- 7 The third chapter, “The Chinatown and the City: Maxine Hong Kingston and the Relocalization of San Francisco,” is devoted to an analysis of Kingston’s novel *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1989) which, according to Arthur, “dramatizes the interaction between canonical and multicultural literature [sic]” (61). Arthur shows how the novel works as a satiric description of San Francisco’s bohemian life, disparaging hippies who flocked to the West Coast in the wake of the Beat movement only to live in white ghettos, oblivious to the cosmopolitanism of the city, its multicultural vitality, eventually creating an ironic form of bohemian provincialism.
- 8 Finally, a fourth chapter, “The Deflowering of New England: Russell Banks and the Wages of Cosmopolitanism,” explores the masculinization of regional fiction as exemplified in Banks’s novels *Hamilton Stark* (1978), *Affliction* (1989) and *The Darling* (2004). Arthur demonstrates how a self-consciousness of the cultural death of New England turns Banks’s fiction into “a means to imagine a version of cosmopolitan detachment that might [...] revitalize the region” (90), how the contemporary writer “provides a manner of representing the local in a way that is amenable to the delocalizing thrust of globalization” (90). Arthur’s study concludes with an epilogue considering the possibility that the polarized debates which Jonathan Franzen has ignited through works like *The Twenty-Seventh City* (1988), *The Corrections* (2001), or *Freedom* (2010) approximate those which regional cosmopolitanism seeks to keep alive. Franzen’s controversial crusade against regional literature, which he sees as dangerously restricting readership, is seen as a paradoxical way to draw various readers into meaningful contact and dialogue with each other.
- 9 All in all, Arthur convincingly demonstrates how writers like Agee, Kerouac, Kingston or Banks achieve a delocalizing potential in their fiction, how modern regional texts become the ground for multiple, intersecting senses of place and protean identities, how they help to shape a sense of place that can be seen as encompassing multiple, simultaneous local affiliations. His work is very well documented, stimulating and thought-provoking, and Arthur’s effort to steer regional literature away from the backwoods of American letters, moving it into “the new American canon” (to borrow the title of the book’s editorial series), probably makes the reading worthwhile.
- 10 However, his main thesis that regional literature after the Great Depression becomes cosmopolitan appears a bit faulty. Although Arthur relates the fiction he studies to the politics of the New Deal and their effort to revitalize American regions, through initiatives like the Program Era, the WPA or the TVA, he does not explain clearly enough why the Great Depression represents a turning point in the history of American regional literature. Arthur also analyzes a very limited number of writers who can be considered cosmopolitan in nature and who write about regional spaces from the outside. For example, one may be struck to find Kerouac envisioned in Arthur’s book as a regional writer. Arthur thus seems to infer truths and make general statements out of mere disjointed samples of fiction which do not seem representative of what is conventionally regarded as regional literature, in four chapters that appear somewhat loosely related (Arthur explains in his introduction why he shies away from any stronger theoretical approach that would enable him to piece the chapters together in a more effective and forceful way).

- 11 In fact, Arthur does not really study regional literature *per se*, nor does he examine the specificities or characteristics of regional texts in contemporary American culture. He analyzes manifestations of cosmopolitan imagination in texts happening to use regional spaces as fictional backdrops. The impression one gets from reading his book is that American regional literature after the Great Depression becomes cosmopolitan simply because the authors studied have enjoyed a multicultural sensibility and an integrative, depolarizing vision right from the start, and maybe also because the world in itself has become globalized, American regions are more connected with each other and with other national spaces. Arthur deliberately chooses to analyze regional fiction rather than regionalist texts (to reinject the terminological differences articulated by Fetterley and Pryse in *Writing out of Place*), to study regional cosmopolitanism rather than cosmopolitan regionalism. His relegation of “regional” into an adjectival second position betrays his deceptive critical goals or intents. As Arthur explicitly situates his work within the scholarly tradition of criticism on U.S. regional literature, indeed, his overall approach eventually flaunts what appears to be an offbeat, clumsy methodology.
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