

Public Abstract

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Title: *Thinking Locally: Provincialism and Cosmopolitanism in American Literature Since the Great Depression*

*Thinking Locally* produces an account of twentieth-century literary history that counters the literary-historical over-reliance on wars as framing events. Eschewing the standard break between pre-World War II and post-World War II periods, this dissertation identifies a debate over the relative merits of provincialism and cosmopolitanism running from James Agee's modernist regionalism through recent books by Maxine Hong Kingston, Russell Banks, and Jonathan Franzen. The writers examined here are not commentators who take sides in this debate, plugging for either the city or the country. Instead, they use the unresolved terms of the debate to shape formal innovations.

The introduction surveys the contemporary academic discussion of cosmopolitanism and then makes a case for the importance of Wright Morris, an author whose centrality is foreclosed by a stress on the cold war as the inevitable framework for the writing of the 1950s. Chapters One through Four offer extended readings of four major works: Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*; Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*; Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey*; and Banks's *Affliction*.

Chapter One argues that Agee produces a modernist commentary on the process of writing the local that is concerned with problematizing the status of the cosmopolitan figure doing the writing--a strategy that has the effect of humanizing Agee's subjects much more effectively than standard New Deal documentary photos and writing that reduce their subjects to their poverty.

Chapter Two argues that Kerouac, by contrast, navigates the zones of commodified local color and institutionalized modernist cosmopolitanism, "delocalizing" the American grain, a phenomenon that grows from a fascination with the surfaces (predominantly, of course, the road) that link and define a paradoxically national essence of the local.

Chapter Three argues that, through her novel *Tripmaster Monkey*, Kingston not only confronts the masculinist and exoticizing tendencies of Kerouac and the San Francisco Renaissance but also draws upon Kerouac for a model of identity as continual process rather than fixed essence.

Chapter Four describes Banks's *Affliction* as a work that reinvents realism as a way of thinking beyond the pseudo-multiculturalist understanding of white working-class masculinity as a form of identity.

The epilogue reads Franzen's first novel, and his later ambivalence at having his third novel chosen for Oprah's Book Club, as an example of twenty-first century social fiction that thrusts the provincial/cosmopolitan debate into public discourse.