

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

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ABSTRACT

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*.