

Regionalist Romance:
“America Eats” and the Culinary Myth-Making of the
Federal Writers’ Project

by

Icarus J. Smith

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Thesis Committee:
David A. Horowitz, Chair
Katrine Barber
Catharine McNeur

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Abstract

This thesis expands upon food historian Camille Bégin’s assertion that the “America Eats” manuscript of the New Deal’s Federal Writers’ Project was “in tune with the interwar revival of regionalism” in the United States. Using archival material associated with the project and regionalist literature of the period, this study explores the dichotomies inherent in the broader regionalist movement of the Depression Era—particularly using the project’s treatment of the American West. Using foodways as the topic and regionalism as the intellectual framework, the FWP employees sought to document what they believed was the authentic culinary character of the nation among the common folk. This research evaluates whether the West of “America Eats” was an exercise in ethnographic foodways research or an attempt to reassert Frederick Jackson Turner’s virulent western man as the authentic national character on the eve of war. As national priorities rapidly shifted in the same timeframe as the development of “America Eats,” we can see a transformation in the type of regionalism utilized—from Howard Odum’s famed science of the region to what he derided as “sentimental romanticism,” which offered a regionalist veneer but only served at the behest of a larger romantic nationalist project—remained one of its insoluble contradictions. As US entry into World War II loomed closer and the need for an unambiguous national unity grew, the balance was tipped in the predictable direction, and the “America Eats’ treatment of the West returned to Frederick Jackson Turner’s values of frontier nationalism. Ironically, the sentimentality adopted by many regionalist thinkers in advance of WWII, represented in the “America Eats” regional essays of the West, spelled the end of the regionalist movement. Just as the trope of the “melting pot” transformed from its original meaning

of “strength in pluralism” to “strength in unity,” so too did regionalism become another means toward national unity. Depression-Era proponents believed that regionalism offered a perfect balance between nationalist homogenization and sectionalist division; wartime buildup permanently tipped the scale toward the former, and regional folk cultures became important only insofar as they served the larger romantic national project.

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I must also acknowledge the contributions of my lovely partner Lucille Dawson—without her presence in my life (and our two animal companions, Tula and Cashew), I likely would have abandoned this project in a fit of hysteria; my mom, Dani Smith, who gave me everything, and supported every single one of my endeavors no matter how woefully inept I usually turn out to be; my dad, Marc Smith, whose work ethic, intellectual curiosity, and affinity for American history and culture must have rubbed off; my grandparents, Sandy and Paul Snodderly, whose love and guidance quite literally saved my life; and my late grandmother, Margaret Smith, whose fondness for wine, good conversation, and soft bread with salted butter set the table for this master's thesis many years ago. Last, I want to express a deep admiration for my dear friend Laura Hoffman,

who is no longer with us, but whose academic and professional achievements had an enormous influence on me, even if I failed to tell her so.

When I was sixteen years old, my dad wrote me a letter containing two pieces of advice: “don’t lose your idealism,” and “don’t be a putz.” I want him to know that I am trying.

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VII. The pleasures of the table are for every man, of every land, and no matter what place in history or society, they can be part of all his other pleasures, and they last the longest, to console him when he has outlived the rest.

Brillat-Savarin, *The Physiology of Taste; or, Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy*

Introduction

*“Every something is a number of somethings.”*¹

The Great Depression decade was a moment in American history that might best be characterized by a profound sense of uncertainty. The anxieties of the era presented a dichotomy that many historians have discussed at length: on one hand, the Depression caused widespread psychological distress among the American people; on the other, as institutional failure ran rampant, the crisis left an ideological vacuum, a blank slate on which intellectuals and artists could envision an ideal future and redefine the nation’s character, free from the constraints of an ambient status quo. From roughly 1932 until the US entry into World War II, people hailing from all corners of the ideological spectrum played a part in the nation’s “cultural rebirth”— many of these efforts were funded by a presidential administration eager to utilize all the tools at its disposal to boost the public’s morale.² It was widely understood by the professionals in Washington that how citizens *perceived* America was as crucial to the recovery effort as any social or economic policy measures.³ In part, these efforts resulted in a body of federally-funded expressive culture that utilized regionalism as the intellectual and aesthetic framework, including a little-known and ultimately unfinished piece of regional foodways literature titled “America Eats.”

¹ Franklin H. Giddings, from *American Regionalism: A Cultural-Historical Approach to National Integration*, (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1938), p. 423.

² Richards Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 361.

³ Christine Bold, “The View From the Road: Katharine Kellock’s New Deal Guidebooks,” *America Studies* 29, No. 2, (Fall, 1988), p. 24.

“America Eats” was a nationwide venture undertaken roughly between 1937 and 1942 by the Federal Writers’ Project (FWP), (later the Writers’ Program), that sought to document an aspect of folk culture that had not yet been explored. Part ethnographic folkways study and part literary narrative, the project hoped to describe not only what the ordinary folk were eating, but the traditions and social customs accompanying the fare. Their findings would be combined into a single volume, comprised of one long-form narrative essay and two to three vignettes for each of America’s five major regions, plus an additional introductory essay. The book would define the nation’s foodways as the sum total of its culinary pluralism, and introduce America to itself in the same way that other FWP projects had; this was what the FWP directors in Washington hoped that “America Eats” would become.

Regionalism provided more than just an organizational tool for the project; it was, to a large degree, the ideological and aesthetic guiding light of most FWP literature. In short, regionalism was a conceptual framework that arose to confront the Great Depression crisis through the national integration of America’s disparate folk cultures. Historians who have examined 1930s regionalism tend to agree that “the Federal Government’s involvement with regionalism was never formalized or wholesale,” and that it was instead a “matter of influence and shared interest in... [guiding] the nation out of the Depression.”⁴ However, to say that regionalism merely “influenced” the “America Eats” project, or that the project was “in tune with the interwar revival of regionalism” as

⁴ Lauren Coats and Nihad M. Farooq, “Regionalism in the Era of the New Deal,” in *A Companion to the Regional Literatures of America*, Ed. Charles L. Crow, (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), p. 75.

historian Camille Bégin wrote, understates the relationship between the two.⁵ “America Eats” was a quintessentially regionalist expression—from the correspondence between the local and national offices, to the field writers’ notes, to the finalized manuscripts—that showcased the dichotomies within the broader regionalist movement.

Questions arise when examining the “America Eats” archives, particularly in the sections covering the American West, that can likewise be asked of regionalism generally. For example, who is given the power to determine what the “authentic” character of a region is—the provincials who reside there, or a professional bureaucrat or academic? When truth and expectation do not match up, which is reported? What exactly is the relationship between the region and the nation? If regionalism is meant to represent a balance between the two, what happens to the regionalist movement when that balance is thrown off by the social and political realities associated with the needs of the Federal Government? At what moment does history become myth; familiarity become romance; and an affinity for one’s home become empty nostalgia? One historian might have offered a clue when they wrote, “[New Deal] regionalism... begins by celebrating difference only to erase it in service of *creating* or *manufacturing* a sense of indigenous belonging to the pre-existing architecture of a national narrative.”⁶

With “America Eats,” the gulf between expectation and reality often led to practices of selective omission, fabrication, and myth-making. When the field writers did not find the provincial caricatures the editors in Washington had imagined, an idealized past crept into the manuscript and was presented as the authentic culinary character of the

⁵ Camille Bégin, *Taste of the Nation: The New Deal Search for America’s Food*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016), p. 5.

⁶ Coats and Farooq, “Regionalism in the Era of the New Deal,” *Regional Literatures*, p. 90.

nation. In some ways, what began as a project of folkways documentation became one of invention—a tendency that may have reflected the mounting war effort and the associated need for national cohesion. How the FWP chose to define the authentic national character almost certainly related to the simultaneous tug-of-war taking place within the world of regionalist thought, between hollow sentimentality in service of a larger national project, and serious regional expression in service of provincial political power and cultural influence. Leading up to the war, everything that regionalists most hoped to promote—cultural pluralism, decentralization, the moral purity of the *folk*, and Americans’ sense of place and belonging—eventually took a backseat to unquestioning national unity. Tensions grew as the writer-researchers in the field more often found a culinary landscape that had been utterly transformed by industrial foodstuffs—far from the idyllic farmsteads and homemade meals that the FWP’s head editors hoped to find.

This research seeks to examine the regionalist movement as it existed in the thirties in tandem with the “America Eats” project, predicated on the notion that a better understanding of the dynamics between the two encourages fuller comprehension of the complexities within regionalism more broadly. These dynamics are nowhere better represented than “America Eats”’ treatment of the American West, a region that held special significance within the national culture. In all that regionalist thought entailed, many professionals working within the New Deal bureaucracy believed they had found an ideological and aesthetic guiding light; the “America Eats” archives offer an exceptional representation of how they sought to apply these ideas, and may offer some insight into why regionalism failed to endure in the postwar years.

Every nationalist movement throughout history sought to establish a national identity through folkways. As industrialization rapidly and chaotically transformed technology, markets, and governments, comfort was sought in nostalgic cultural representations of the ordinary folk, for it was in the folk that the authentic soul of the nation was believed to be held. The definition of national cuisine has been an important facet of nation-building—indeed, food is one aspect of culture which arises organically, from the earth itself. Food represents a direct connection between culture and land, and land is critical to the identity of the nation-state. The connection between culture and land was precisely what regionalists sought to find, document, and promote in “America Eats.”

Because “America Eats” was the first large-scale examination of the country’s traditional foodways, it was a surprise to find that a mere two pieces of full-length historical scholarship currently exist on the project: a 1978 Ph.D. dissertation by Charles C. Camp, “America Eats: Toward a Social Definition of America’s Foodways,” and a 2016 work authored by French sensory historian Camille Bégin, *Taste of the Nation: The New Deal Search for America’s Food*. Camp, who upon receiving his PhD would go on to become a prolific researcher on regional folkways for the Maryland State Arts Council, argued that the project represented a “golden age of American regional foodways research” which took a novel approach by looking at the social aspects of food culture, a lens which greatly influenced foodways studies in later decades.⁷ Bégin approaches “America Eats” as a sensory exploration of America’s folkways, analyzing taste as a

⁷ Charles John Camp, “American Eats: Toward a Social Definition of American Foodways,” Ph.D. Diss., University of Pennsylvania, (1978), p. 6.

“symbolic, cultural, affective, and economic currency... [allowing] eaters to identify and differentiate themselves along race, class, gender, and ethnic lines.”⁸ Bégin’s research and analysis was instrumental to the completion of this project.

Two other books, Pat Williard’s *America Eats: On the Road With the WPA* and Mark Kurlansky’s *The Food of a Younger Land: A Portrait of American Food... From the Lost WPA Files*, offer casual accounts of the project for lay audiences. Williard takes a contemporary approach to the topic in which she retraces the steps of the FWP field writers to determine if any of these social food customs still exist in the twenty-first century. Willard concludes the book saddened that fresh ingredients and home-cooked meals have become a luxury that only some can afford, stating that in the twenty-first century, “class divides us more than regions do.”⁹

Kurlansky’s Introduction provides a useful historical overview of the project, followed by various short selections from the archives for each of the major regions. *The Food of a Younger Land* is where I first learned of the project as I researched regionalist expression in the Depression Era. Besides these, the foodways manuscript receives almost no mention in histories of the Federal Writers’ Project. Because the project never reached completion, to this day only a handful of interested people have examined the “America Eats” archives.

Much of the primary source material pertaining to the “America Eats” project—hundreds of pages of correspondence, field notes, recipes, and raw manuscripts— have been digitized by the History Department at the University of Michigan. The website,

⁸ Camille Bégin, *Taste of the Nation: The New Deal Search for America’s Food*, Urbana: (University of Illinois Press, 2016), p. 17.

⁹ Pat Willard, *America Eats: On the Road With the WPA*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2008), p. 288.

What America Ate, is a term-searchable digital archive containing FWP material from all over the country, though the bulk of it is held in a warehouse under the purview of the Library of Congress. The database is dedicated to all things food related from the Depression Era, including “America Eats” material, popular cookbooks, recipes, photographs, and short essays by various historians— including Bégin. Without *What America Ate*, this project would not exist.

In addition to material pertaining to “America Eats,” this research utilized histories of the Federal Writers’ Project and New Deal arts programs. First, Jerre Mangione’s *The Dream and the Deal: The Federal Writers’ Project, 1935-1943* (1972), despite its age, remains one of the most comprehensive histories of the agency; it helped that Mangione worked for the FWP and had personal relationships with many important employees in the agency. Jerrold Hirsch’s *Portrait of America: A Cultural History of the Federal Writers’ Project* offers a more recent study of the agency, focusing primarily on the balancing act between romantic nationalism and cultural pluralism— an important dichotomy that is also central to regionalism— that many New Dealers were forced to reckon with. Susan Schulten’s “How to See Colorado: The Federal Writers’ Project, American Regionalism, and the ‘Old New Western History’” provided important conceptual material for this project with her examination of the intersection of regionalism, the work of the FWP, and the American West. Christine Bold’s “The View From the Road: Katharine Kellock’s New Deal Guidebooks” provided a useful study of Kellock’s leadership role within the FWP and her influence in shaping the foundations of the WPA’s tourism guidebooks; I discovered a great deal of missing connections in Bold’s piece.

This thesis likewise required some background knowledge in American foodways history, provided by three main works. Charles John Camp's *American Foodways: What, When, Why, and How We Eat in America* (1989) is a short but captivating examination of food throughout the modern era, and includes a useful historiographical essay of foodways studies up to the time of publication. *A Square Meal: A Culinary History of the Great Depression* (2016) by Andrew Coe and Jane Ziegelman offers an expansive look at everything relating to food during the Depression years: from "public policy to hobo lore," as well as a few pages which offer some basic coverage of the "America Eats" project.¹⁰ Finally, Jennifer Jensen Wallach's *How America Eats: A Social History of U. S. Food and Culture*, provided a wonderful overview of America's food history, focusing particularly on the racial, ethnic, class, and political ramifications of foodways.

Regionalism is a topic of study wherein the line between primary and secondary source material is heavily blurred, partially due to the fact that scholars who have sought to *describe* regionalism were often simultaneously *advocating* for or *creating* works of regionalism themselves. For example, leading sociologist of the interwar period Howard W. Odum published *American Regionalism: A Cultural-Historical Approach to National Integration* in 1938; this definitive work both explained the movement, while arguing in favor of the regionalist lens in academic scholarship. This category includes numerous journal articles and books by regionalists such as folklorist B. A. Botkin, Donald

¹⁰ Andrew Coe and Jane Ziegelman, *A Square Meal: A Culinary History of the Great Depression*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2016), p. ix.

Davidson, Lewis Mumford, and many others, who seemed to write endlessly throughout the interwar period on the topic of regionalism from almost every conceivable angle.

A handful of contemporary historians have dared to study American regionalism in depth. Michael C. Steiner's article "Regionalism in the Great Depression" offers an unparalleled overview of the regionalist movement of the 1930s, simplifying an extremely complex topic. Steiner's piece is concerned with the relationship between regionalism and ordinary people— finding important parallels between elite forms of regionalist expression and regionalist themes throughout mass culture. Two books by Robert L. Dorman, *Revolt of the Provinces: The Regionalist Movement in America, 1920-1945* (1993) and *Hell of a Vision: Regionalism and the Modern American West* were perhaps the two most influential works concerned with regionalism. *Revolt of the Provinces* discusses interwar regionalism not merely as "local culture," but often as a "democratic civic religion, a utopian ideology, and a radical politics," and arising from the ongoing destruction of folk cultures due to modernization.¹¹ *Hell of a Vision* narrows the focus onto western regionalism— beginning in the late nineteenth century and carrying through to the late twentieth century— and demonstrates the movement's belief in the American West as a "distinctive, special place."¹² Dorman's description of the West as simultaneously both the "nationalist West" and the "localist West" describes an important dichotomy within regionalism more broadly, illustrating the inexorable relationship between regionalism and nationalism.¹³ A third work, *All Over the Map:*

¹¹ Robert L. Dorman, *Revolt of the Provinces: The Regionalism Movement in America, 1920-1945*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), p. xiii.

¹² Robert L. Dorman, *Hell of a Vision: Regionalism and the Modern American West*, (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2012), p. 15.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-11.

Rethinking American Regions (1996) is a useful collection of essays by four different historians on various aspects of regionalism. The Introduction, written by Edward L. Ayers and Peter S. Onuf, focuses on the important dichotomy between nationalism and regionalism (and sectionalism) in American history; another essay by leading historian of the New Western school Patricia Nelson Limerick, "Region and Reason," argues for the continued use of the regional model in the study of western history, believing that region "[permits] one to adjust and train one's vision in a way that [uncovers] connections, ties, and relations," and "carries the joint appeal of reason and sentiment."¹⁴ A number of journal articles are used that examine regionalism through a variety of lenses, and take positions that are either highly critical of regionalism or display a deep affinity for the movement. For a topic as benign as regionalism, it seems to have pit historians against one another to an extraordinary degree.

Many additional works have been used in order to better understand some of the intellectual trends taking place in the Depression years. Richard Pell's 1973 work *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* remains one of the best books to date on the important cultural currents of the era, focusing on the cooperation and conflict between New Deal liberalism and radical-left currents. Of particular interest is Pell's description of changing attitudes among radical thinkers as the World War II began to transform the world. William Stott's *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* describes the documentarian tendencies of the era, producing what Alfred Kazin called "a preponderance of descriptive non-fiction and

¹⁴ Patricia Nelson Limerick, "Region and Reason," from *All Over the Map: Rethinking America's Regions*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 87, 84.

documentary literature.”¹⁵ Particularly interesting were Stott’s chapters on the Works Progress Administration’s output, and the radical disagreements taking place within the New Deal bureaucracy over the direction of the agencies output. Michael Denning’s *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (1997) is an oft-cited piece of research that covers the liberal-left coalition— the Popular Front— that rose to combat the threat of fascism, and the outward affect this movement had on popular culture.

Historian Svetlana Boym’s *The Future of Nostalgia* provides an illuminating description of how nostalgia functions in the process of constructing national culture. The book focuses primarily on nostalgia’s role in post-Soviet nationalist movements, but many of the inquiries she makes are highly transferable to thirties America. Indeed, nostalgia was instrumental in regionalist cultural expression— “America Eats” especially— and was the central emotion that drove antimodernist and romantic currents within the movement. Similar to Boym’s emotional history, the collection of essays titled *The Emergence of National Food: The Dynamics of Food and Nationalism* (2019) delivers a necessary overview of how different national movements throughout history have used cuisine to further define their national culture. The Introduction provides an overview of the complex relationships between modernism, Romanticism, nationalism, and regionalism, and shows how food fits into larger historical trends. One essay in particular, Amy B. Trubek’s “Nationalism, Culinary Coherence, and the Case of the

¹⁵ Alfred Kazin, from *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* by William Stott, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986, p. 3

United States: An Empirical or Conceptual Problem?” discusses the complexities of American cuisine, wondering if such a thing exists at all.

Finally, the historian Greg Grandin’s 2016 work *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America* provides important context on the national mythology of the West, and the historical conceptualization of the frontier from the 1890s to the present day. In addition to linking the frontier of the American West to the frontier of economic and cultural imperialism of the twentieth century, Grandin’s chapter on the Depression Era shows how, for a brief moment, Turner’s conceptualization of the West was briefly turned on its head, as American social democracy grew and cultural emphases shifted. It was short lived, however, as the romantic mythology of the West was brought back in full force with US entry into the war—a dynamic well represented by the “America Eats” archives.

These, and many more sources, have provided the bulk of the information and historical context necessary to completing this project. In the research process, I hoped to connect a few dots that have not yet been connected: regionalism, the FWP’s “America Eats,” and the American West. There is a great deal to say about the extensive historical connections between these three things, and the late 1930s and early 1940s offers a dynamic backdrop with which to tell this story. If I have done these topics justice, I will have shown how, on the eve of a totalizing war, the regionalists in charge of the FWP sought to use the topic of food as a way to foster “devotion, loyalty, and sacrifice,” by using regionalism as their intellectual framework.¹⁶ Regionalism provided the language,

¹⁶ Lewis Mumford, from Richard Pell’s *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 360.

the unique sensory quality of food provided feelings of comfort and home, and the American West as described by Frederick Jackson Turner in the 1890s provided the nationalist mythology necessary to pull Americans out of their rut that was the Great Depression. The late thirties was an era of “cultural regeneration,” and “America Eats’s” focus on the mythological glory days of western conquest revived the Turnarian spirit and readied the country for war.¹⁷

Chapter One tries to make sense of the broader regionalist movement of the thirties by answering these questions: who were the regionalists; what did their worldview entail; what effect, if any, did they have on the broader American culture; and how did they translate regionalist ideas into cultural expression, especially those produced through New Deal arts programs. Regionalism is a notoriously complex subject containing many layers, and Chapter One attempts to demystify and simplify regionalism by differentiating between its many iterations and explaining its relationship to other intellectual concepts in the Depression years. I believe that a better understanding of the different facets of regionalist thought can offer a stronger intellectual foundation on which the following chapters may rest.

Chapter Two provides a brief history of the “America Eats” project. It explores the intended purposes of the project, introduces some of the people involved, lays out the dynamics between the the directors in Washington D.C. and the field writers working in the provinces, and addresses some of the hitches that the FWP ran into along the way. This chapter also focuses on the concept of national authenticity, and questions whether authenticity was being sought out and documented, or being invented. By examining the

¹⁷ Bégin, *Taste of the Nation*, p. 31.

project's discussion of certain immigrant groups, the urban versus rural dichotomy, and the ubiquity of modern culinary trappings, we can begin to see a pattern of selective omission within the regional narrative essays.

Finally, Chapter Three narrows the focus of the project, using the larger West—a combination of what the FWP called the “Far West” and the “Southwest” as an example of how western regionalism and “America Eats” fit together. The chapter presents the West as something of an anomaly, having a distinctive frontier history and a special place within the hearts and minds of Americans during the Depression. Further, within the West existed an important dichotomy since nineteenth-century westward expansion: a “localist” or regional West existed simultaneously alongside a “nationalist” West—and both were central to the American national project. Chapter Three contends that the West deserved special attention in the eyes of the national editors because it represented its own unique contradictions—as the most characteristically American region of all, yet profoundly dissimilar from the rest of the country. Further, the regional essay of the Far West has two qualities that make it a more useful than the others: first, it was fully completed; second, the national editors expressed their approval of the essay and asked other regions to follow their example; from these two facts we can surmise what “America Eats” would have looked like had the full manuscript been published.

As it exists right now, what we call “America Eats” is a collection of thousands of pieces of paper, written by hundreds of different writers, over a period totaling roughly five years. Together, it is a body of work that expresses a multiplicity of viewpoints, styles, and subjects; all very different, yet existing under a single idea, ostensibly called the “America Eats” project. The final product, which was meant to be a consolidation of

everything mentioned here, never actually materialized. The writers misunderstood the unifying vision, as too did the bureaucrats in Washington; political circumstances shrunk the allotted time and funding; and the country was eventually forced to march to war. As I see it, a similar story could be told of regionalism: urban intellectuals had a grand idea that they loved but never quite understood. Hundreds of people wrote about it, and made art about it, and held meetings about it, and theorized about it... but a cohesive movement never materialized. Eventually, the movement was folded into a larger nationalist project, and everything that made regionalism special and distinctive was papered over by the homogenous American abstraction; not through malice or intentional cooptation, but by simple historical circumstance.

Chapter One American Regionalism in the Depression Years

I. The Spirit of Place

“We ought not to be surprised, but we are now a little surprised, and maybe even disconcerted, to discover that our vision of a united nation must allow a place for enormous and highly self-conscious areas of differentiation— a Northeast, a South, a Southwest, a Middle-West, a Northwest, a Far West— that have not after all been leveled into uniformity, even by the powerful agencies of machine production and urban thought.”¹⁸

In an historical examination of a New Deal arts project such as “America Eats,” it is important that regionalism’s influence be considered, and the complexities of the broader movement be appreciated. A discussion of regionalism can provide vital intellectual context with which to better understand a variety of New Deal efforts—not least of which the Works Progress Administration’s (WPA) cultural output. Certain themes appear in many of the WPA’s projects: the search for, and documentation of, authentic American culture; a central focus on ordinary people and folkways; the differentiation between regions and regional cultures; and the aspiration to protect America’s diversity and folk traditions from the homogenizing effects of industrialization, urbanization, and the sprawl of mass culture through market consumption. These themes are perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the Federal Writers’ Project’s (FWP) study of traditional regional cuisine. A look at foodways offered a useful way to express America’s pluralistic regional character, and to celebrate American *folk*, while using the innate sensory quality of food to distinguish the virtues of tradition from the deficiencies of the modern world.

¹⁸ Donald Davidson, “Where Regionalism and Sectionalism Meet,” *Social Forces* 13, No. 1, (Oct. 1934), p. 23.

Some of the most prominent regionalist thinkers and regionalist fellow travelers of the New Deal Era had a role in the burgeoning relief effort of the Roosevelt

Administration:

...several regionalists participated quite literally in New Deal legislation and programs. Benton McKaye worked with the Tennessee Valley Authority, John Collier with the Bureau of Indian Affairs, B.A. Botkin and John Lomax on the Federal Writers' Project, Rupert Vance with the National Resources Committee, Paul Taylor with the Resettlement Administration, [and] Howard Odum with the Civil Works Administration.¹⁹

One historian cautiously described President Roosevelt himself as the country's only "regionalist president," having once delivered the keynote address at a University of Virginia conference of regionalist academics.²⁰ We can at least be certain then that the President was intimately aware of the movement, and that he shared many of their goals and values, even if he did not consider himself a part of it. Though their presence could be found throughout the New Deal bureaucracy, regionalists never joined together in a unified vision or program. However, it is clear that they were kindred ideologues, striving along parallel paths toward a similar goal: to right the ship of state—culturally, economically, and spiritually—using a back-to-basics approach. Regionalists believed that wisdom could be found in simplicity, the ordinary, and the everyday.

Historians of regional thought have noted that most self-described regionalists were urban-cosmopolitan professionals. This often meant that they appreciated America's regional folk cultures from a bird's eye view, as academic or theoretical.

¹⁹ Lauren Coats and Nihad M. Farooq, "Regionalism of the New Deal Era," from *A Companion to the Regional Literatures of America*, Ed. Charles C. Crow, (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), p. 75.

²⁰ Robert L. Dorman, *Revolt of the Provinces: The Regionalist Movement in America, 1920-1945*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), p. 292.

Their expressions of affinity for America's folk bordered on sentimentality, a fascination with the exotic provincial, or a utopian pastoralism—relatedly variations of neo-Jeffersonianism or romantic agrarianism—amounting to nostalgia for a preindustrial and premodern national landscape. In a word, some regionalists simply had a fondness for the aesthetic we might call Americana. This dynamic is demonstrated in the “America Eats” archives and in other projects; as the professionals in Washington D.C. requested that field researchers seek out and describe authentic regional cultures the way they *believed* they existed, and because the national editors had the final say in the finished product, the manuscripts often reflected the brand of regionalist aesthetic that sociologist Howard W. Odum derided as “sentimental romanticism,” opposed to his superior regionalism grounded firmly in the social sciences.²¹ However these projects chose to conceptualize regional cultures, the grand influence of regionalism in New Deal artistic output was undeniable; the young professionals who reshaped American culture in the thirties and early forties, supported by the Federal Government, molded the nation's new identity characterized by honest and virtuous workaday folk, and on a firm foundation of regionalist thought.

There is something peculiar about economic downturns that lead to a rise in regional-based thinking; one historian called regionalism in the modern era a “cyclical process of forgetfulness and discovery.”²² Popular interest in regionalism seems to wax and wane with the market: its first major wave followed the Panic of 1893, and its most

²¹ Howard W. Odum, “Notes on the Study of Regional and Folk Society,” *Social Forces* 10, No. 2, (December, 1931), p. 166, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2570243>.

²² Edward L. Ayers and Peter S. Onuf, “Introduction,” *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 2.

recent resurgence—a variety called bioregionalism, intertwined with an ascendent environmentalist movement—arose during the years of the Carter Recession, from roughly 1980 to 1982. Perhaps owing to the uniquely dreadful conditions of the Great Depression, which caused a widespread sense of “perilous dislocation,” regionalism found its strongest influence during this era.²³ The idea grew in power and significance by offering people a desperately needed “sense of place.”²⁴ Historian Michael C. Steiner puts a finer point on the special significance of *place* during this period:

...regionalism [addressed the] desire for the security of place amid the disorder and stress of the Great Depression that permeated all levels of society. A latent desire for order and stability became paramount during an era dominated by contradiction and confusion. A yearning for the familiar and predictable manifested in tradition, community, and attachment to place was a recurring theme in elite, popular, and folk records of the period.²⁵

Historian Edward L. Ayers was more succinct: “In [ages of] disillusionment with big structures and transhistorical dreams,” he wrote, “many Americans decided that places closer to home deserved more of their loyalty.”²⁶ While not all expressions of the need for predictability and order can be assigned to the regionalist trend, regionalism can account for a great deal of cultural reactions to feelings of anxiety and dislocation in the 1930s.

The psychological effects of the depression crisis on the population are hard to overstate: the initial failures of the financial industry, the corporate sector, and Herbert Hoover’s Federal Government, to rise to the immense challenge and to meet the needs of

²³ Michael C. Steiner, “Regionalism in the Great Depression,” *Geographical Review* 73, No. 4, (October 1983), p. 434.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 434.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 443.

²⁶ Edward L. Ayers, *All Over the Map: Rethinking America’s Regions*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 2.

ordinary citizens in the first two years of the crisis caused a widespread loss of faith in institutional power. More, people experienced the Depression as something deeper than a mere market upheaval—it was a spiritual catastrophe seemingly beyond human control, and the result of an indifferent God.²⁷ Rather than manifesting a righteous political anger against capital and the ruling elite who caused the crash, feelings of “fatigue, despair, [personal] failure” and hopelessness most characterized the era—disheartening to many of the leading political activists who spent the decade organizing for a proletarian revolution that would never arrive.²⁸ Absent a socialist revolution against capital, the arena of hearts-and-minds supplied the most fertile ground for change.

One of the most culturally significant consequences of the Great Depression was the tacit challenge to the nation’s exceptionalist narrative, the limitless growth of markets, and the American dream—all integral to the national mythology which had, so far, maintained social cohesion. As one historian declared, “the promise of the frontier and mobility, the solidity of democratic principles... appeared to have collapsed.”²⁹ The collapse of these national myths presented some terrifying possibilities to America’s political class; across the western world, communists, fascists, anarchists, and various national-separatists had gained power and influence in response to related economic crises and the aftereffects of World War I. Unless serious efforts were made to foster social cohesion, the US risked the kind of political atomization occurring elsewhere in the world. The national myths had to be reasserted in minds of Americans—albeit with a

²⁷ Richard Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 97.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

²⁹ Dorman, *Revolt of the Provinces*, p. 148.

social democratic twist that made space for the modern values of pluralism and provided the basis for a robust welfare state. It was in the reconstruction of national mythology that regionalists believed they held the key— through the study and affirmation of regional pluralism and the *folk*— to the authentic soul of America.

As the near-total collapse of industrial capitalism left a void which could be filled by a variety of insidious, antidemocratic ideologies, more benign cultural and political potentialities also flourished. Through the despair and ruin of the early Depression years, by 1934 there had risen new symbols of “insurgency, upheaval, and hope” in an energized labor movement, radical cultural projects, increased social democratization, liberal reforms, and the faith of utopian optimism.³⁰ Within this ideologically experimental milieu, regionalism truly caught fire. To its proponents, regionalism had the potential to be the antithesis of all the excesses that had led to America’s nosedive— industrialism, free-market capitalism, hyper-individualist culture, political centralization, and boundless expansion— and offered a more prudent alternative than communist revolution, (a slight overcorrection in the minds of even the most leftwing regionalists). The regionalist program, insofar as one existed, sought to anchor Americans to the land they inhabited and to foster a “spirit of place”; celebrate strength in pluralism; balance centralized political power in Washington with increased provincial influence; and rebuild ailing rural communities based on values of regional development, sustainability, egalitarian democracy, and a renewal of folk tradition.³¹ Its proponents believed that

³⁰ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, (London: Verso, 1997), xiv-xv.

³¹ Steiner, “Regionalism in the Great Depression,” p. 435.

regionalism could provide a necessary equilibrium between two poles that each threatened to tip the balance.

...But what *is* regionalism, exactly?

II. Regionalism Defined

“...no word is more sloppily defined in its usage, or more casually understood.”³²

“The regionalism that I adhere to could be defined simply as local life aware of itself. It would tend to substitute for the myths and stereotypes of a region a particular knowledge of the life of the place one lives in and intends to continue to live in.”³³

In 1938, two of regionalism’s leading proponents Howard W. Odum and Harry Estill Moore published one of the era’s authoritative works on the subject, *American Regionalism: A Cultural-Historical Approach to National Integration*, which they dedicated to scrutinizing every conceivable aspect of their marvelous sociological “science of the region.”³⁴ The term’s ambiguity and multiplicity of meaning required the first thirty-four pages of the book be dedicated to sussing out its definitions: “so abundant are the evidences, so wide the range of application, so far-reaching the implications, so varied and diverse the meanings and discussions of this new cultural economy,” the authors boasted, “it makes little difference from which angle we approach its general treatment.”³⁵ Odum and Moore believed that the key to understanding American history,

³² Wendell Berry, from Charles Reagan Wilson’s “American Regionalism in a Postmodern World,” *American Studies* 4, No. 2, (1997), p. 145, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41157263>.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 154-155.

³⁴ Howard W. Odum, “A Sociological Approach to the Study and Practice of American Regionalism: A Factorial Syllabus,” *Social Forces* 20, No. 4, (May, 1942), p. 425, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/2570875>.

³⁵ Howard W. Odum and Harry Estill Moore, *American Regionalism*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1938), p. 3, 6-7.

studying folk cultures, ensuring the survival of democracy, and planning the economy, infrastructure, and society, lay hidden in the concept of the region; their hopes for regionalism seemed limitless. The book's totalizing treatment of regionalism illustrated that, by 1938, the idea had grown so enormous and convoluted that a precise and useable definition had become impossible to assign; even by such knowledgeable advocates as Odum and Moore. Regionalists of the thirties encountered this problem often, and much of the debate surrounding regionalism's usefulness hinged upon confusions which only seemed to multiply as its popularity spread. It seemed as if everyone privy to the idea possessed their own definition and their own path to achieving regionalist objectives, for better or worse.

Contemporary scholars have likewise expressed frustrations with the term's ambiguity; as one historian once complained, the moniker in fact conceals a great deal more than it illuminates.³⁶ Another wrote that "trying to find recurring patterns and a substantial, distinctive core in the regionalisms of the [Depression] period is like wrestling with Proteus: pinned down in one form, fresh, seemingly unrelated variations quickly arise."³⁷ Regardless of the risks, a number of brave historians have climbed into the ring. Michael Denning, historian of the Popular Front, called regionalism a "multi-accented slogan" which fused agrarian nostalgia and regionally-based social sciences.³⁸

³⁶ Earl H. Rovit, "The Regions Versus the Nation: Critical Battle of the Thirties," *Mississippi Quarterly*, (Spring, 1960), p. 90.

³⁷ Steiner, "Regionalism in the Great Depression," p. 432.

³⁸ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 133. Denning's vague definition is useful because it illustrates the inherent dichotomy in many expressions of regionalism: something can convey two seemingly contradictory ideas simultaneously, a dynamic well demonstrated in the "America Eats" archives.

Historian Michael C. Steiner defined regionalism as a “complex cluster of ideas” and the “study of areal variations [in various fields] and the sense of identity that persons have with the portion of earth which they inhabit,” leading to some awareness of a “place-related identity” within areas smaller than entire nations, but larger than mere kinship groups or neighborhoods.³⁹ One of the leading authorities on the topic, Robert L. Dorman defined regionalism as the propensity to seek out and define a regional culture’s “spacial conceptualization,” its particular qualities and characteristics, and the self identification of the ordinary people who live there.⁴⁰ To historians Edward Ayers and Peter Onuf, regionalism’s definition connotes a confrontation with the ever-present “dialectic of space-time, mobility and nostalgia” within the study of history.⁴¹ In my own words, regionalism describes the link between expressive culture, history, and the geographic region from whence it came or of which it seeks to describe, and inso doing, connects that region to some larger abstraction—historically this has been a nationalist project, but some regionalists sought to connect regionalist thought to utopian projects.

In all regionalist expression, certain aspects are emphasized over others: a painting of an idyllic western countryside is an expression of affinity for place through its distinctive landscape; a short memoir about growing up in a Midwestern aggie town illustrates the connection of memory to place; a photograph of a farmhand working the parched soil of the Great Plains showcases the strength and virtue of ordinary people; an ethnographic study of southern black sharecroppers utilizes a regionalist lens to tie

³⁹ Steiner, “Regionalism in the Great Depression,” p. 432.

⁴⁰ Robert L. Dorman, *Hell of a Vision: Regionalism and the Modern American West*, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012), p. 3.

⁴¹ Edward L. Ayers, et. al., *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 1.

heritage, race, place, and folkways together to illustrate how identity is a convergence of multiple factors; and a literary accounting of traditional regional foodways, such as the “America Eats” project, connects culture and social customs directly to the land through food. Each one of these examples is a unique expression of regionalism, yet they all share common themes: history, identity, folkways, and land. Further, they all seem to suggest a way things *ought to be*, through nostalgic representation of the way things *used to be*.

The interplay between identity, culture, history, and the areal environment is necessarily expressed sentimentally— this is perhaps why regionalism’s primary enduring legacy lay in the world of arts and literature. Regionalist expression utilizes the sensory aspect of a region— the sights, sounds, smells, and *tastes*— to describe the feelings of the artist, and to arouse an emotional response in the audience; as Allen Tate once wrote, the regionalist’s muse was their “immediate organic sense of life.”⁴² This sentimentality became an expression of one’s sense of place within the larger national whole; translating to strong feelings of national patriotism. Regionalism and nationalism, then, are not at odds with one another, but are in fact highly complimentary.

If regionalism was one of the key intellectual and artistic movements of the thirties, then the parity between the region and the nation was its key dichotomy. As most regionalists would admit, regionalist thought existed only insofar as it served a romantic nationalist project in America. Without nationalism as a counterweight, regions can devolve into sections, and sections are not a part of a larger whole— they are islands

⁴² Allen Tate, from “The Region Versus the Nation: Critical Battle of the Thirties,” Earl H. Rovit, *Mississippi Quarterly* 13, No. 2, (Spring, 1960), p. 98.

that compete, secede, and war. While regionalists of all political persuasions sought stronger provincial power and weakened centralized power, this was never meant to be at the expense of the nation. Regionalism of the thirties was not at odds with the nation; it only hoped to encourage a type of national character that was careful not to pave over regional identities for the sake of uniformity. In the process of negotiating the pitfalls of the Depression, regionalists hoped that America could find strength in its pluralisms.

III. Who Were the Regionalists?

*“...A regional "sense of community" is developing. We are thinking of our relationships with others in terms of the regions which we inhabit; here are elicited our basic interests; here is the ideal tangible areal unit to which we can attach our loyalties. The psychic overtones of this intermediate areal unit are increasingly distinct and must be considered by all who are concerned with attitudes and opinion.”*⁴³

Intellectuals and artists from various fields utilized the regionalist lens throughout the 1930s to promote a new sense of Americanness. Regionalist thought influenced schools of the visual arts, literature, and architecture; many of the social sciences utilized a regionalist lens with which to study American culture; and folklore studies increasingly developed a regional quality, focusing upon the importance of local life against the threat of modern erasure. The continued survival of American democracy, they believed, hinged upon the flourishing of “highly self-conscious areas of differentiation” and a nationwide embrace of cultural pluralism, in opposition to the intrinsic modern conditions of centralization, industrialization, and the uniformity of mass culture emanating from America’s major cities.⁴⁴

⁴³ J. O. Hertzler, “Some Notes on the Social Psychology of Regionalism,” *Social Forces* 18, No. 3, (March, 1940), p. 337.

⁴⁴ Davidson, “Where Regionalism and Sectionalism Meet,” p. 23.

The desire to protect and preserve American folkways appealed in equal measures to people of all political persuasions. The pro-labor and radical left found value in regionalism for its emphasis on common people as the moral center of the nation; the center-left liberals saw regionalism as a means for developing intelligent technocratic policies of regional planning and governance based upon an authentic understanding of the folk; conservatives— such as the southern agrarians— saw regionalism as way to preserve their culture against the onslaught of federal intervention, liberal moralizing in popular culture, and a budding civil rights movement. Generally speaking, the regionalists' tendency to abide, if not fully embrace, the historical continuity of local customs of *all regions*— even if those included white supremacy as a central feature— strongly appealed to conservative intellectuals. This, coupled with their disastrous sectionalist history, meant that southern academics produced some of the most resolute regionalist literature of the interwar period.

In the popular imagination, regionalism is most widely recognized as a movement within the arts and literature; American realist painters particularly captured the essence of regionalism for wider audiences. Three realist midwestern painters dubbed the Regionalist Triumvirate— Thomas Hart Benton, Grant Wood, and John Steuart Curry— particularly embodied the aesthetic in their pieces, working with themes of naturalism, ruralism, agrarianism, and an predilection toward ordinary working class people. Curry, Wood, Benton, and a number of other regionalist painters had to battle for legitimacy within the world of fine arts to have their work taken seriously by urban elite taste-makers. The artistic authorities living in what Wood called the “eastern capitals of finance and politics,” still valued European, urban, and cosmopolitan subjects over

Americana.⁴⁵ To most art critics, scenes of middle America were still looked down upon as quaint, kitsch, and too sentimental for fine art. As will sound familiar, writing in 1935, Wood believed that the Great Depression offered a unique opportunity to “[throw] down the Tower of Babel, erected in the years of false prosperity,” and to rebuild American culture based upon homegrown folk roots and “self-reliance” in place of dependency upon European and urban styles.⁴⁶ The belief that the Depression was an exciting opportunity remained common among regionalist artists, and illustrated their back-to-basics mentality. More than just paint on a canvas, these painters envisioned through their art a national renewal— an agrarian Eden based on regionalist values.

Parallel to regionalist painting, the popularity of regionalist literature grew in the Depression Era; by the thirties, almost every region in the country had developed a distinct literary scene. The writers incorporated local dialects, folk traditions, environments and sceneries, and imbued their work with a sense of sentimentality for a particular *time* and *place*. One historian described regional literature as navigating binaries that were characteristic within regionalism more broadly, such as “nation and region, primitive and civilized, rural and urban, literary and vernacular... nature and culture, community and individualism.”⁴⁷ Also like painting, regionalist writing had long been derided by the urban literati as mere “local color,” ultimately a “minor element” in the American canon; most of it was simply too quaint to be considered serious

⁴⁵ Grant Wood, “Revolt Against the City,” <https://www.raggeduniversity.co.uk/2012/10/12/grant-wood-revolt-city-1891-1942/>

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Stephanie Foote, “The Cultural Work of American Regionalism,” *A Companion to the Regional Literatures of America*, Ed. Charles L. Crow, (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), p. 31.

literature.⁴⁸ However, as popular attitudes shifted throughout the thirties, an appreciation for local color stories grew, and major publications such as *Harper's*, *Scribner's*, and the *Atlantic Monthly* were obliged to cater to the folksy tastes of their audiences. Indeed, some of the most definitive works of the era can be considered of the regionalist variety: as Erskin Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* (1932) and *God's Little Acre* (1933); John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* (1939); Margaret Mitchell *Gone With the Wind* (1936), and *The Good Earth* (1931) by Pearl Buck. As a matter of fact, most of these were the decade's leading bestsellers.⁴⁹

Though lacking the popular appeal, non-fiction and academic writing was the meat-and-potatoes of the regionalist movement. In books, academic journals, roundtable discussions, and regional conferences, the complexities of regionalism were hashed out by historians, sociologists, geographers, social planners, and philosophers, used both as a lens through which to examine other topics, or examined as the topic of study itself. Like with fiction, every major American region suddenly seemed keen on exploring its culture and relationship to the nation which it belonged; this typically took place in the universities, many of which developed entire departments dedicated to regional studies at state universities in North Carolina, Montana, Oklahoma, and New Mexico, and many others.⁵⁰ One leading example, a collection of writers out of Vanderbilt University in Nashville developed the era's definitive work of southern regionalism called *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* in 1930. This collection of essays advocated for a return to the region's agrarian traditions by resisting the tide of

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴⁹ Steiner, "Regionalism in the Depression Era," p. 438.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 430.

modernity, and reasserted pride in distinctive southern culture. In regionalist fashion, the work expressed a deep aversion to rapid industrialization, corporate capitalism, and the waning of traditional southern culture as the country grew increasingly homogenized. To the Vanderbilt Agrarians, in the Depression lay an opportunity for the South to return to its roots of “order, leisure, social stability... human dignity, and independence.”⁵¹

Some of the era’s leading works of scholarship were either a part of, or heavily influenced by, the regionalist movement. Historian Walter Prescott Webb published a comprehensive environmental and social history called *The Great Plains* in 1931, for the first time defining the distinctive characteristics of the region in relation to the rest of the country, and tying the region’s geographic qualities directly to its history;⁵² the aforementioned sociologist Howard W. Odum published his definitive work on Southern subregional cultures in 1936 titled *Southern Regions of the United States*, utilizing an approach of “folk sociology” to help integrate the South back into the nation by exorcising the “pathologies” and “ideological separatism” inherent in its sectionalist history;⁵³ Donald Davidson’s 1938 work *The Attack on Leviathan: Regionalism and Nationalism in the United States* took a conservative and antimodernist philosophical approach to America’s ailments, utilizing regionalism as way to assert southern

⁵¹ Mary Ann Wimsatt, “Political and Economic Recommendations of ‘I’ll Take My Stand,’” *Mississippi Quarterly* 33, No. 4, (Fall, 1980), p. 434.

⁵² Webb’s *The Great Plains* was once criticized as “good thinking, but poor history” to which Webb is said to have replied “I have never asserted that *The Great Plains* is history... to me, *The Great Plains* is a work of art; contemporary historians seem to agree with both assertions.

⁵³ George L. Simpson Jr., “Howard Odum and American Regionalism,” *Social Forces* 34, No. 2, (Dec. 1955), p. 101, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2572822>. Odum’s *Southern Regions* is a perfect example of how regionalists continuously sought to differentiate regionalism from sectionalism in their work.

independence and strength against the onslaught of centralized cultural and political power; and *The Culture of Cities* by Lewis Mumford, which “traces the course of the ‘delocalized man’ where he soon [became] the ‘composite American’ pioneer...’ ‘a man without a background’—only able to save himself by renewing his spiritual connection with the land he now inhabits.”⁵⁴ Each of these approach regionalist thought from vastly different angles, yet they all share common themes and values; another testament to the movement’s immense diversity.

None of the regionalist artists, writers, and academics, mentioned here can be considered ordinary, working American folk. So, did regionalism have an influence on everyday Americans? As Steiner writes, the answer is complex. The historian cites various examples from popular culture and mass media, such as books, films, radio programs, and documentary expression, that foregrounded nostalgic and back-to-the-earth themes that might be considered regionalist-inspired. Despite the popularity of such expression, it is clear that “regionalism did not become a self-conscious mass movement in the United States during the 1930s.”⁵⁵ However, there is ample evidence—the FWP’s field research archives being one valuable trove—that, when confronted by the “bewildering changes” of the thirties, Americans found security in, and a deep appreciation for, their sense of place within the world.⁵⁶ The “vernacular regional impulse” seemed to be what the FWP’s national editors were seeking out when they

⁵⁴ John L. Thomas, “Lewis Mumford: Regionalist Historian,” *Reviews in American History* 16, No. 1, (March, 1988), p. 161, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2702081>.

⁵⁵ Steiner, “Regionalism in the Great Depression,” p. 443.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 442.

planned the “America Eats” project, using the novel approach of foodways research.⁵⁷

As fears of “rootlessness” and imminent disaster continued to haunt public life, one’s traditional food could offer a strong sensory evocation of nostalgia and home: feelings of comfort that could serve to anchor Americans to their regional and national heritage.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 444.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 446.

Chapter Two The "America Eats" Project

I. The Regional Melting Pot

*Many foods, many nations. Yet one food, one nation. Many lands, one land.*⁵⁹

In the late 1960s, a local celebrity chef named Louis I. Szathmáry II attended a silent auction held in the downtown Chicago apartment of the aging novelist Nelson Algren. Among the clutter of items being sold sat an old typescript with the words “Am Eats Algren” scrawled across the top in pencil.⁶⁰ As he meandered through the crowd, and noticing the chef’s interest in the document, Algren appealed to him to avoid bidding on the item: “The recipes in it are lousy,” he said, “It was a government writers’ project. I did it because I needed the money.”⁶¹ Against Algren’s advice, Szathmáry placed the winning bid on the manuscript, where it was added to his collection of culinary curios, later donated to the University of Iowa. Ten years after Algren’s death in 1981, and about fifty years after the original typescript was written, the University of Iowa Press published Algren’s manuscript as *America Eats*. To this day, it remains the only portion of the government writers’ project to be published in its original state.

Despite the title’s suggestion, Algren’s “Am Eats” did not cover the foodways of the whole country, but rather covered the Middle West region of the U.S. where Algren had acted for a short time as the head editor of the Illinois Writers’ Project, the midwestern regional office of the Federal Writers’ Project, based in Chicago. If the project had been completed, Algren’s piece would have been accompanied by five more

⁵⁹ Nelson Algren, *America Eats*, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992), p. 79.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, xviii.

⁶¹ Nelson Algren as quoted by Louis I. Szathmáry II, Preface to *"America Eats"* by Nelson Algren, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992), xiii.

long-form essays, each representing one of the other major regions of the US: the South (Southeast), the Northeast, the Southwest, and the Far West; two or three casual vignettes with recipes for each region; plus an additional introductory essay. At its most straightforward, the “America Eats” project was an examination of the eating habits of America’s major regions, written in a light and accessible style for lay audiences, and intended to boost regional tourism, foster domestic interest in the country’s pluralism, and like other Works Progress Administration (WPA) endeavors, to help Americans awaken to their own culture.⁶² There is also a subterranean history here— about regionalism, nostalgia, and the concept of national authenticity in the New Deal Era— in the examination of the unfinished project. The story of the project’s formation, development, organization, and its ultimate shelving, provides a subtextual account of late thirties American culture and the slow diminishing influence of regionalism that is as historically pertinent as the study of American foodways contained within the project itself. The “America Eats” archives offers a microcosmic example of larger contextual issues within regionalist thought, anxieties about the modern world, and nostalgia for a romantic agrarian ideal. The project was at once a good-faith study of regional folk foodways, and one of national myth making— an example of the dialectic within the liberal, New Deal cultural reforms between romantic nationalism and cultural pluralism.

The primary architect, national administrator, and head editor of the "America Eats" project, Katharine Kellock, initially envisioned "America Eats" as a region-by-region

⁶² William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), p. 103.

...account of group eating as an important American social institution; its part in the development of American cookery as an authentic art and the preservation of that art in the face of mass-production of foodstuffs and partly cooked foods and introduction of numerous technological devices that lessen labor of preparation but lower quality of the product.⁶³

The length of the work, set to be published in early 1942, would stand at 60,000 to 70,000 words, written in a style that was “light, but not tea shoppe,” and would focus on real anecdotes rather than vague generalizations.⁶⁴ Kellock required the emphasis of the "America Eats" project to be divided equally between the people and their fare; Kellock insisted that field writers include the traditions, cultural institutions, ethnic identities, and gendered realities attached to the food.⁶⁵ In instructions to regional editors, Kellock made clear that the project would not become another repository of recipes,⁶⁶ nor be written in the “frothy” manner typical of professional food writers; "America Eats" would be a piece of regionally-based ethnographic research presented with a literary quality suitable for general audiences.⁶⁷

⁶³ "Brief Manuscript Plan." Montana State University Library, 2336, Collection Montana State University Library, Box 1, Folder 1 Correspondence Washington D.C., Series 1 - "America Eats" Montana State University Library Collection 2336 - WPA records, 1935-1942 Series 1 - "America Eats" Box 1 - "America Eats" - Correspondence Washington D.C.. <https://whatamericaate.org/full.record.php?kid=79-2C8-161&page=1>, I.

⁶⁴ "Writing Guidelines for Regional Editors," Montana State University Library, 2336, Collection Montana State University Library, Box 1, Folder 2 Editorial Procedures and Reports, Series 1 - "America Eats" Montana State University Library Collection 2336 - WPA records, 1935-1942 Series 1 - "America Eats" Box 1 - "America Eats" - Editorial Procedures and Reports, <https://whatamericaate.org/full.record.php?kid=79-2C8-163&page=1>.

⁶⁵ Katharine Kellock, from Mark Kurlansky's *The Food of a Younger Land: A Portrait of American Food from the Lost WPA Files*, (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009), p. 17.

⁶⁶ A widely popular repository of recipes had already been published by the *New Yorker's* first-ever food critic Sheila Hibbens in 1932 called *The National Cookbook*. Hibbens similarly endeavored to celebrate regional American cuisine in the same fashion as French *la cuisine régionale*.

⁶⁷ Katharine Kellock, from Pat Williard's *"America Eats": On the Road with the WPA*, (New York, Bloomsbury, 2008), p. 4.

In an era of increasing industrialization and the widespread mass production of preserved food, various examples of group feasting—grange meetings, church suppers, political engagements, union picnic—were believed by Kellock to be one of the last mainstays of America’s authentic culinary tradition. Editors were especially interested in those social gatherings “of the nostalgic variety,” a phrase referencing those gatherings that had a longer history, but which also alludes to the regionalist spirit of the project.⁶⁸ The editors expressed contempt for the growing prevalence of “labor-saving devices” and technological advancements within household kitchens, trappings of modernity which they believed were steamrolling over America’s genuine culinary tradition. One outline proposal suggested rather hyperbolically that “the frying pan almost [wrecked] America”; another line suggested it was women’s magazines and women in the workplace that threatened the nation’s precious culinary conventions.⁶⁹ The emphasis of the project would be on republican simplicity and the inherent virtue of the “non-professional cook” who, through the observance of folk customs passed down through the generations, had been quietly keeping American tradition alive since colonial times, in spite of ubiquitous industrialization and modern artificiality.⁷⁰

"America Eats" was a pioneering work that sought to document what historian Camille Bégin called America’s “collective sensory identity,” at a moment in time when

⁶⁸ ""America Eats" Book Proposal and Outline." Montana State University Library, 2336, Collection Montana State University Library, Box 1, Folder 1 Correspondence Washington D.C., Series 1 - "America Eats" Montana State University Library Collection 2336 - WPA records, 1935-1942 Series 1 - "America Eats" Box 1 - "America Eats" - Correspondence Washington D.C.. <https://whatamericaate.org/full.record.php?kid=79-2C8-14D&page=1>, p. 3.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 3.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 3.

this authenticity was feared to be disappearing, or already having disappeared, under the yoke of the pre-made, preserved, and prepackaged food industry.⁷¹ Folk cookery, or, the culinary tradition of ordinary people, was seen as a useful avenue through which to establish the historic cultural hybridization of European, African, and Native American culinary traditions; to celebrate America's common man and his contribution to the larger national character; to examine the considerable overlap between American culture and its interaction with the natural landscape; to illustrate the strengths of cultural pluralism; and to examine human connectedness and community bonds through the universal act of eating—in particular group eating. Additionally, the ethnographic information collected by FWP field workers might have provided the Federal Government with supplementary grassroots knowledge of provincial life, which could guide intelligent policy making.⁷²

If much of this sounds familiar, it is because "America Eats" would have been an example of both regionalist literature and of scientific-regionalist research, the distinction made by Howard W. Odum. Many of the project's advocates were self-described regionalists; its organization was regional in nature; it preoccupied itself with authenticity, cultural pluralism, and nostalgic visions of the past; editors expressly desired accounts of friendly "regional partisanship" over the proper way to prepare dishes; and it centered ordinary people's sense of place, expressed through their

⁷¹ Camille Bégin, *Taste of the Nation: The New Deal Search for America's Food*, (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 154.

⁷² William Weaver Woys, *America Eats: Forms of Edible Folk Art*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), p. 10.

traditional eating habits.⁷³ In other words, the project's aims and emphases read as if they were carbon copied from popular regionalist tracts of the period.

However, the chain of command, a web of bureaucracy centered in the Nation's capital, delegating assignments within strict parameters to the farthest provinces, created some noticeable tensions. Ironically, the source material often makes it appear as if the national office knew what each regional essay would look like *before* field workers engaged with the research. As Bégin writes, the “[national] editors’ ideas about regional cuisine never quite matched the fieldworkers’ understanding of their local foodways—in fact, [the fieldworkers] could barely understand why the topic was of interest in the first place.”⁷⁴ The mythologizing of provincial culture by professional Washington bureaucrats strikes at the heart of the central contradiction within “America Eats,” and within regionalism more broadly.

II. The Federal Writers’ Project and Foodways Research

“Is it the purpose of the arts projects to employ people— to keep from starving to death inexpert people— or is it to increase the expertness of the work... Are we feeding artists or creating artistic expression?”⁷⁵

The FWP was a relatively short lived agency; the “America Eats” project was around for just a fraction of that time. The FWP was created in 1935 under the purview of the WPA, funded through the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act as part of a second wave of New Deal relief programming called the Second New Deal. In the span of about

⁷³ Andrew Coe and Jane Ziegelman, *A Square Meal: A Culinary History of the Great Depression*, (New York: Harper & Collins, 2016), p. 275.

⁷⁴ Bégin, *Taste of the Nation*, p. 25.

⁷⁵ John Steinbeck, from *The Dream and the Deal: The Federal Writers’ Project, 1935-1943* by Jerre Mangione, (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1972), p. 347.

seven years, the FWP engaged in research on a variety of cultural questions for the purpose of assembling a body of literature that would “introduce America to Americans, and to make the culture acceptable to the people to whom it belonged.”⁷⁶ The FWP completed and published a massive amount of literature for American audiences such as regional and state guides, various histories and folklore studies, and narratives recorded from ex-slaves; some of these experienced some marginal market success. All told, between 1935 and 1942, the FWP produced over one-thousand books, pamphlets, and a variety of other public issuances.⁷⁷ Additionally, there were a number of projects that were never fully realized: a six-volume series about regional handicraft traditions to be published under the name “Hands That Built America”; multiple books on African American folklore and culture in the same vein as Zora Neal Hurston’s *Of Mules and Men* (1932); a study on the topic of regional conservation to be called “Reclaiming our Heritage;” and “Men Working,” “American Lives,” and “Architecture for Living” that were also meant to be a continuation the the *American Guide Series*.⁷⁸ “America Eats” is counted among the FWP’s graveyard of unfinished projects.

Field research for “America Eats” initially began under the name of the Federal Foodways Research Program in 1937. The book’s uninspired original title was “America Sits Down at Table,” though it was placed on hold soon after due to other priorities.⁷⁹ The project was revived as “America Eats” the summer and fall of 1941; it was in this short six month period that the majority of research took place. To illustrate this, of the

⁷⁶ Jerrold Hirsch, *Portrait of America: A Cultural History of the Federal Writers’ Project*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), p. 42.

⁷⁷ Jerre Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, p. 352.

⁷⁸ Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, p. 220.

⁷⁹ Bégin, *Taste of the Nation*, p. 21.

archival material containing a date, roughly ten times more material was submitted in 1941 than 1937. Field writers spent these few months spreading out into the American hinterlands, attending local banquets, festivals, and community gatherings, and recording their experiences as they went. As Bégin notes, this field material, “notes, essays, and reports,” makes up the bulk of the archives.⁸⁰ Most of these pieces remain unattributed—unfortunate because we know that at least a few were written by well-known authors.

Kellock’s role in the project— both as the originator and the primary national editor— was central to its development. Jerre Mangione, Kellock’s contemporary and later foremost historian of the FWP, referred to her as a “small tornado of a woman,” who approached her work with unmatched levels of tenacity, or even a “religious fervor.”⁸¹ Extensively well-traveled, educated in American history, and with a professional background in social work, Kellock was deeply concerned with the literary quality of the FWP’s output under her watch, perhaps more than its status as a rehabilitative tool for out of work writers.⁸² She brought to her work a progressive, revisionist, and reformist vision of American history and culture— optimistic about the future, dedicated to democratic ideals, and exceedingly more interested in the contributions of ordinary Americans than history’s “Great Men.” Kellock was no radical, however, despite the reputation that the FWP and other New Deal arts projects had garnered as hotbeds of socialist ideology. When once-head of the FWP Henry Alsberg was hauled in front of the anticommunist Dies Committee in 1938, he said of Kellock that she would have been

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁸² Christine Bold, “The View From the Road, Katharine Kellock’s New Deal Guidebooks,” *American Studies* 29, No. 2, (Fall, 1988), p. 7.

“easily admitted to the Daughters of the American Revolution,” a conservative women’s patriot group with the motto, “God, Home, and Country.”⁸³ In descriptions of Kellock, we can see a tug-of-war between liberal cultural pluralism and conservative romantic nationalism, also present in the FWP more broadly.

Kellock had already made a name for herself as the “Highway Route” editor for the *American Guide Series*, the most widely recognized and successful FWP project, and “the finest contribution to American patriotism that has been made in our day,” according to Lewis Mumford. Like “America Eats,” the series was another installment in what writer Alfred Kazin in 1942 called a “literature of nationhood.”⁸⁴ Under the leadership of FWP National Director Henry Alsberg, and using raw field data collected by FWP workers on the ground, the guides featured essays on local histories, economics, geography, and culture; Kellock pushed Alsberg to include driving tours, in the hopes that motor tourists would use the guides to explore regional sights and “experience history and culture through place” as they traversed the American landscape. Her emphasis on the importance of the driving tours indicates Kellock’s firm belief in the importance of Americans’ regional identity and the spirit of place; it was not enough to know a particular region’s characteristics on paper, that knowledge had to be coupled with *experience*.⁸⁵

⁸³ David. A. Taylor, *The Soul of a People: The WPA Writers’ Project Uncovers Depression America*, (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), p. 217.

⁸⁴ Alfred Kazin, from Susan Schulten’s “How to See Colorado: The Federal Writers’ Project, American Regionalism, and the ‘Old New Western History,’” *Western Historical Quarterly* 36, No. 1, (Spring, 2005), p. 49.

⁸⁵ Schulten, “How to See Colorado,” p. 57.

Kellock collaborated with the FWP director— Henry Alsberg from 1937 to 1939, then with John D. Newsom from 1939-1941— and Lyle Saxon, the regional director of the South located in the Louisiana Writers' Project office, to establish the plans and guidelines of "America Eats."⁸⁶ Once complete, instructions and a comprehensive outline were sent to regional directors, who passed them down to the field writers working out of the various state offices. The top-down organization, as well as the insistence that Washington editors have the last say in what material was published and what narratives were followed fostered disagreements, misunderstandings, resentment, and as ultimately led in-part to the decline of the project. By the project's revival in 1939, as US involvement in Europe appeared inevitable, the FWP was already in a shakeup. The agency was renamed the Writers' Program, had its employment numbers drastically reduced, and high turnover rate at the top of the heap meant that priorities were always shifting. By this point, the "America Eats" project was seen by some as an unwelcome burden on FWP employees already under immense pressure to complete other projects. One writer, Stetson Kennedy, complained that Washington kept "cooking up these sidelines, and 'America Eats' was one of these sidelines."⁸⁷ The director of the Tennessee Writers' Project called the nationwide foodways study "uniquely uninspiring."⁸⁸

Because "America Eats" was meant to be an extension of the *American Guide Series*, certain facts can be gleaned about the former from histories of the latter. The

⁸⁶ Bégin, *Taste of the Nation*, p. 18.

⁸⁷ Stetson Kennedy, from Kurlansky, *Food of a Younger Land*, p 19.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

search for “regional distinctiveness” was central to both projects, and the national FWP office hoped that they might catalog them before they were permanently erased by an all-consuming mass culture.⁸⁹ Schulten and Hirsch both explain that tensions arose in the creation of each region’s identity; while national editors hoped to avoid “local bias, commercial interest, and local pride,” they nevertheless had to rely upon local knowledge recorded by the FWP field writers.⁹⁰ It was Washington editors, not locals, who had the final say in what was published and their idea of regional and rural character sometimes differed greatly from how those people saw themselves. While the national office often sought to build upon existing caricatures of the American hinterlands, the field writers who belonged to these places were simultaneously striving to appear “less parochial and more national.”⁹¹ This dynamic also spoke to an important cultural distinction between the two groups.

Historians who have examined aspects of the FWP, such as Mangione, Hirsch, Schulten, and Bégin, have drawn a sharp contrast between management in Washington, D.C., and the rank-and-filers in regional and state offices. Management was comprised of the professional class: they were educated, ethnically diverse, liberal cosmopolitans, usually with prior experience in the world of writing and publishing or related fields. On the other hand, the FWP field workers, who earned the pejorative “pencil leaners” by conservative critics of New Deal work programs, did not qualify for their positions based on merit, but rather upon financial need. After all, the FWP was, at its heart, an economic relief program; a fact which was sometimes lost as national editors strove for a

⁸⁹ Schulten, “How to See Colorado,” p. 65.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 66.

higher quality of their product. The FWP was notorious for hiring anyone to entry level positions who could pass a basic literacy test. As one writer remembered, “To work for the FWP you had to take an oath that you had no money, no job, and no property. I was eminently qualified.”⁹² As such, the field workers came from a variety of backgrounds, professional experience, and skill level.

On the other side of the coin, many FWP field writers were already household names, or would soon become so, a testament to how even the most talented writers had trouble finding work. Eastern and midwestern cities usually boasted the most talent: Nelson Algren, Saul Bellow, Jack Conroy, and Richard Wright (who, while working for the FWP, was writing *Native Son*) worked out of Chicago; New York City had Ralph Ellison, and Claude McKay; and Zora Neal Hurston worked in the Florida state office, to name only a few. Besides these, hundreds of other voices are represented in the archives: historians, playwrights, and journalists; ethnic Europeans, Jews, African Americans, and Chicano writers; social democrats, communists, liberals, and apparently “at least two Republicans.”⁹³ Because their research and essays for "America Eats" would eventually be incorporated into the larger regional pieces, stitched together by the regional editors, the majority of the field work contained no byline.

⁹² Kurlanksy, *The Food of a Younger Land*, p.10.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 24.

III. Food in the Depression Era

“Eggs! She had none. The few hens she possessed were either burdened with the responsibility of baby chicks... dispositions ruined and cross-eyed with chagrin over confinement and the hot weather, or had temporarily joined the Industrial Workers of the World.”⁹⁴

Descriptions of the Great Depression typically use the topic of food as a device with which to further illustrate the extensive economic difficulties: descriptions of war veterans forced to sell apples on the street corner; soup lines zig-zagging through city blocks; and, as in the quote above from the "America Eats" archives, families, primarily rural women, forced to adopt techniques of resourcefulness in the cultivation, preparation, and preservation of food. Precarity, coupled with unprecedented government intervention, differentiated the years between 1929 and 1945 from other periods in American history in the development of national cuisine. A specific food culture developed around scarcity, though, for the first time, the Federal Government interceded in a variety of ways; with widespread distribution of emergency rations; nutrition and home economics classes; instructional radio programs on food preservation techniques; local subsistence farming tutorials; and sociological studies of the food habits of ordinary Americans. Margaret Meade's work within the National Research Council's Committee on Food Habits throughout the thirties and forties is one of the most widely-

⁹⁴ Alice Prescott Young, "Depression Cake," 1941, Montana State University Library, 2336, Collection Montana State University Library, Box 1, Folder 3 Editorial Notes and Research (State Office), Series 1 - "America Eats" Montana State University Library Collection 2336 - WPA records, 1935-1942 Series 1 - "America Eats" Box 1 - "America Eats" - Editorial Notes and Research (State Office), <https://whatamericaate.org/full.record.php?kid=79-2C8-1F2&page=1>, p. 1.

recognized examples, in which the government sought to implement nutritional reform in the regions most affected by drought and poverty—the rural South, Midwest, and West.

Hunger was a common concern for the working class in the early years of the Depression, leading to hunger marches and food riots between 1930 and 1935. As communist organizers sought to take advantage of the crisis, then-labor leader Edward McGrady warned that if starvation was allowed to continue, “the doors of revolution would be thrown wide open.”⁹⁵ Though hunger and starvation was largely remedied by 1935, the harsh realities of precarity scarred the American people on a spiritual level, and the topic of food remained in the forefront of many people’s minds. As such, and noted by Bégin, food scarcity became a popular subject in the expressive culture of the 1930s. To name only a few examples, the photographs of Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, and Ben Shahn showcased the hunger of rural people in intimate detail; writers such as John Steinbeck and Meridel Le Sueur handled the topic with great empathy in works like “Women on the Breadlines” and *The Grapes of Wrath*; the topic of hunger could even be found in popular music, such as the 1932 ballad of the Great Depression, “Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?”

On the other hand, the FWP writers working on “America Eats” were less interested in the topic of widespread caloric precarity than they were the potentially exciting culinary implications of the crisis: the necessity of the homemade meal, the regionalization of foodways, and the increasing occurrence of group feasting, such as those that developed out of charity to the needy. Like other New Deal arts projects, it was America’s romantic and triumphant past, not its troublesome present, that would be

⁹⁵ Edward McGrady, from Andrew Coe and Jane Ziegelman’s *A Square Meal*, p. 154.

the focus of "America Eats." In fact, Bégin writes plainly that "the Great Depression is singularly absent from New Deal food writing," though the quotation that begins this section, taken from an anecdote about a woman who invents a cake without the aid of eggs, milk, or butter, titled "Depression Cake" is one notable exception.⁹⁶ Discussions of thriftiness, resourcefulness, and food preservation, though still a reality in ordinary American's lives throughout the later 1930s and certainly into WWII, were largely omitted from "America Eats," replaced with accounts of national abundance and joyful celebration. As one piece of scholarship contends, the later thirties was a period of stark transition; works like Hibben's *The National Cookbook* and the "America Eats" project were part of a "gastronomic salvage mission" to rescue the country's traditional foodways against the "onslaught of modernity," not an opportunity to dwell on the culinary consequences of an economic catastrophe.⁹⁷

IV. Race, Ethnicity, American Authenticity

Throughout the development process of "America Eats," the concept of authenticity remained a central concern of national editors; both regional and national authenticity. Exactly which ethnic cuisines, referred to in the source material as

⁹⁶ Bégin, *Taste of the Nation*, p. 52.

⁹⁷ Ziegelman and Coe, *A Square Meal*, pp. 278-279.

“nationality group eating,” would be included, and which would be omitted?⁹⁸ In correspondences, national editors appealed to regional editors to consider only those customs which had become fully “welded to national life,” for “the amount of space that can be devoted to each region is so small that there is little room for what is merely exotic.”⁹⁹ Bégin writes that the uncertainty surrounding authenticity was never fully resolved, leaving most “ethnic” cuisines in a gray area, their inclusion in the final book dependent upon the whims of Kellock and her colleagues in Washington.¹⁰⁰ As more ambiguous situations arose, attempts were made to clarify the question of authenticity, such as one pronouncement from the national office that “foreign” food might only be considered if it had “been adopted by large numbers of people outside the foreign born community.”¹⁰¹

These vague guidelines resulted in an unsystematic process for choosing what to include and what to leave out. In one memo to regional editors, a Scandinavian lutefisk supper was expressly marked for inclusion in the Middle West essay, since that tradition had been “widely adopted by the general population” of that area; a “Chinese christening party,” on the other hand, was not considered authentically American.¹⁰² Even in the

⁹⁸ Evelyn S. Byron, “Middle West Region Correspondence,” 1941, Library of Congress, MSS55715, Collection United States Work Projects Administration records, 1524-1975, Box A829, Folder 4 “America Eats” Correspondence, Oct. 1941, <https://whatamericaate.org/full.record.php?kid=79-2C8-41D&page=1>.

⁹⁹ “Editorial Report to Regional Editors,” Library of Congress, MSS55715, Collection United States Work Projects Administration records, 1524-1975, Box A829, Folder 1 “America Eats” Administrative Material, <https://whatamericaate.org/full.record.php?kid=79-2C8-391&page=1>.

¹⁰⁰ Bégin, *Taste of the Nation*, p. 38

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 38, FN 97.

¹⁰² “Writing Guidelines for Regional Editors.” Montana State University Library, 2336, Collection Montana State University Library, Box 1, Folder 2 Editorial Procedures and Reports, Series 1 - “America Eats” Montana State University Library Collection 2336 - WPA records,

minor portions of regional essays which covered urban areas, Chinese-American culinary traditions were omitted, with FWP editors calling their culture “impervious” to integration into the larger society.¹⁰³

On the other hand, African American and Chicano culinary traditions, for better or worse, were both slated as centerpieces of their respective regions. African American cooking was presented as central to the South’s regional culinary character; though their “special talent for cooking” relied upon racist stereotypes of black people as having a superior “keenness of sense perception,” inherent in more “primitive” people.¹⁰⁴ Despite the New Deal regime’s comparatively liberal and inclusive attitudes about race, black people were still depicted as subservient “mammie” and “uncle” figures, skilled in the kitchen but in little else. Needless to say, the South’s white supremacist traditions (and certainly the other regions, as well) were never critically examined. In the West, especially the Southwest, Mexican culinary tradition was wrapped up in the narrative of western conquest. Bégin writes that Mexican-American’s central role in the region’s story was, in part, a way to boost tourism through a reenactment of a romantic frontier past.¹⁰⁵ Mexican food represented a curiosity: it had been fully integrated into western regional culture, and therefore *national* culture, but it was a stark reminder of a history of white conquest in the West.

1935-1942 Series 1 - "America Eats" Box 1 - "America Eats" - Editorial Procedures and Reports. <https://whatamericaate.org/full.record.php?kid=79-2C8-163&page=1>, 4.

¹⁰³ Bégin, *Taste of the Nation*, p. 136.

¹⁰⁴ "Notes for America Eats," Library of Congress, MSS55715, Collection United States Work Projects Administration records, 1524-1975, Box A829, Folder 1 "America Eats" Administrative Material, <https://whatamericaate.org/full.record.php?kid=79-2C8-38A&page=1>, p. 2.

¹⁰⁵ Bégin, *Taste of the Nation*, p. 39.

Questions of American authenticity extended beyond questions of race and ethnicity: the majority of the project dealt almost exclusively with rural America. The WPA arts programs sought to emphasize a romantic agrarian portrait as the authentic America, and the "America Eats" archives offer further proof of this ruralism. The rural/urban dichotomy in American life had become especially apparent in the years after WWI, when the "rural problem" caused a population drift into urban centers. The problems in the countryside were persistent "outmoded habits and attitudes" and a lack of economic opportunity, driving younger generations to urban areas throughout the early twentieth century.¹⁰⁶ With this "city shift" came a transformation of foodways. Kitchens grew smaller and access to fresh food more limited, while urban Americans relied increasingly upon prepackaged food and time-saving devices. Changing technologies, food science, and an emphasis on efficiency all had a predictable impact on the American diet. The city shift was only exacerbated by the economic and environmental catastrophe of the thirties which hit rural areas the hardest. All manner of romantic agrarians sought to reverse this trend through culture; in "America Eats", this was done through depictions of rural-regional tradition as America's authentic culinary identity, and of rural people as the virtuous heart of American life. Though field write-ups on urban life are found throughout the archives, the regional essays largely avoided urban cuisine—a clear expression of regionalist values.

¹⁰⁶ Ziegelman and Coe, *A Square Meal*, p. 8.

V. The End of "America Eats"

Washington expected first drafts of all "America Eats" material around Thanksgiving, 1941. December 3, the Washington office dispatched reminders that the due date had passed, and again asked for all material pertaining to the food project to be sent in as soon as possible. Four days later, the Japanese attacked the American Naval Base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, and the Writers' Program was thrown into disarray. Subsequent memos into late December and early 1942 called for all research to be mailed "at once... even if in rough form and incomplete," and the conservation of all material became "highly important... as the war effort may cause an abrupt change in the activities under the Writers' Program."¹⁰⁷ The five regional essays arrived in Washington in varying conditions: the Far West and the Middle West, though very different in both style and substance, arrived in their most complete states, while the Southwest, the South, and the Northeast arrived in various stages of incompleteness with apologies from their editors.¹⁰⁸ In March of 1942, the Writers' Program became the Writers' Unit of the War Services Subdivision, and director John D. Newsom was replaced by Merle Colby, who trimmed all projects not directly related to the war effort. Kellock was fired in May. She spent her last two weeks turning all "America Eats" material over to the Library of Congress, material which would not be seen again for another 30 years.

¹⁰⁷ Walter M. Kiplinger, "New York Correspondence," 1941, Library of Congress, MSS55715, Collection United States Work Projects Administration records, 1941-1945, Box A830, Folder 2 "America Eats" Correspondence, Dec. 1941. <https://whatamericate.org/full.record.php?kid=79-2C8-542&page=1>, p. 1.

¹⁰⁸ Kurlansky, *The Food of a Younger Land*, p. 21.

Not only were the constituent parts of the project largely incomplete, much of it was utterly unusable, as it did not meet the guidelines set by Washington. The archives show consistent problems on the side of management with the material they received from regional offices. One memo, sent September of 1941, complained that,

None of the material being forwarded is satisfactory as it stands, for some of the states that sent in material, in addition to the requested suggestions, misunderstood the purpose of the book, which is to describe group meals as revelations of significant social customs and attitudes and the development of native cookery. The publication will not be a cookbook and it will not give much attention to dishes of recent foreign importation.”¹⁰⁹

This quote illustrates the most common breakdown in communication between Washington and regional offices: no matter how many times instructions were passed down the pike, writers in the field continued to believe that they were contributing to a cookbook rather than an ethnography of regional group eating. An inordinate amount of the archived field notes betray this misconception: recipes, lists of ingredients, and roadside restaurant menus, copied word-for-word, without consideration for the social aspect of eating.

Management’s insistence that FWP workers sniff out the remnants of a truly authentic, home-cooked cuisine created another challenge, as writers continuously found that industrial-made food had already become ubiquitous nearly everywhere they went. One field report claimed that “regional cooking had been forced out by the products of

¹⁰⁹ Kiplinger, Walter M.. "Northeast Correspondence." 1941. Library of Congress, MSS55715, Collection United States Work Projects Administration records, 1524-1975, Box A829, Folder 3 ""America Eats"" Correspondence, Aug. 1941 - Sept. 1941.
<https://whatamericaate.org/full.record.php?kid=79-2C8-3EB&page=1>

fast freight and the canning factory”; another that “the omnipresent chain store had wiped out individuality.”¹¹⁰ National editors envisioned a book describing well-known regional traditions: Vermont Sugaring-Offs, Pennsylvania Dutch Sunday Dinners, Possum Hunt Dinners, Clam Bakes, Catfish fries, Colorado Trout Suppers, etc.¹¹¹ What the field writers found instead was a nation already up to its ears in “pop corn, peanuts, candy bars, [and] ice cream cones” in which “regional foods and distinctive tastes had become market commodities rather than lived experiences.”¹¹² In other words, Washington hoped their field writers would discover a world of agrarian romance and culinary authenticity which no longer existed; when this discrepancy became apparent, they became increasingly willing to “strain the point.”¹¹³ Efforts by management to invent regional cultural practices caused a passive resistance from state and regional writers, leading Bégin and others to speculate that this, in addition to event of December 7, may have been why the project never reached completion.

Despite its problems, the project, like other New Deal arts projects, took a snapshot of interwar America at a moment when the country was on the precipice of a dramatic technological and social change that would follow World War II. Mark Kurlansky describes some of the noteworthy changes between 1940 and 1950: the population increased a staggering six-hundred percent, the national GDP tripled, car

¹¹⁰ Bégin, *Taste of the Nation*, p. 34.

¹¹¹ ""America Eats" Book Proposal and Outline." Montana State University Library, 2336, Collection Montana State University Library, Box 1, Folder 1 Correspondence Washington D.C., Series 1 - "America Eats" Montana State University Library Collection 2336 - WPA records, 1935-1942 Series 1 - "America Eats" Box 1 - "America Eats" - Correspondence Washington D.C.. <https://whatamericaate.org/full.record.php?kid=79-2C8-14D&page=1>, p. 4.

¹¹² Bégin, *Taste of the Nation*, p. 34-35.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 34.

ownership nearly doubled, and the country performed its final transformation from a producer economy to a consumer economy. The "America Eats" archives provide a portrait of an America not yet scarred by a system of interstate highways, still culturally regional and locally minded, before the country underwent a revolutionary transformation into the modern nation it is now.

The national editors of the FWP likely saw the writing on the wall; and while much of this transformation was already well underway, they still saw an America that they hoped to preserve, even if much of their effort amounted to myth-making. As war became inevitable and the need for patriotism and national unity grew, the regionalists of the FWP utilized their framework as best they could to meet the immense challenges of the moment. In the "America Eats" project, the effort to revitalize nationalist mythology can best be seen in the restoration of the romantic frontier, the awakening of Frederick Jackson Turner from his slumber, and reassertion of the West as the quintessential American region and the authentic national character. As one correspondence said in light of the recent attack at Pearl Harbor: "In view of the national emergency... it may be well to stress the way the settlers... managed to provide themselves with palatable meals, even though they lacked the foods and cooking facilities now considered necessities."¹¹⁴ In other words, after a long decade of crisis, impotence, and melancholy, it was time to reintroduce Americans to the virile man of the Western frontier.

¹¹⁴ Walter M. Kiplinger, "Arizona Correspondence," 1941, Library of Congress, MSS55715, Collection United States Work Projects Administration records, 1524-1975, Box A830, Folder 2 "America Eats" Correspondence, Dec. 194. <https://whatamericaate.org/full.record.php?kid=79-2C8-509&page=1>, p. 1.

Chapter Three The West and “America Eats”

I. The Regional West, the National West

*“Where the pioneers struggled forward with lolling tongues are now hard-surfaced roads, filling stations, hot-dog stands, even at times a traffic problem. But on either hand is an unconquerable West. Here, forever, is the primitive, the sun, the winds, the blizzard and the thunderstorm. Here there is room, remote from cities and from salesmanship, for a national soul to grow.”*¹¹⁵

*“The West at large is hope’s native home, the youngest and freshest of America’s regions, magnificently endowed and with the chance to become something unprecedented and unmatched in the world.”*¹¹⁶

The American settlement process of the greater West throughout the nineteenth century—the areas of the northern Great Plains, the Rocky Mountain region, the Great Basin, the Columbia Plateau, and the Pacific Coast—led to the dawning of a regional identity, defined by a number of writers and scholars in the final decades of the century. This became a regional consciousness “as distinct and characteristic as that of the Old South,” and rooted in the region’s geographic and ecological dissimilarity from much of the eastern half of the continent.¹¹⁷ While aspects of western distinctiveness have been exaggerated, internal variances downplayed, and the central role of the Federal Government in frontier settlement ignored by early scholars, the West developed distinct political institutions, cultures, social attitudes, and folklore, that continue to make the

¹¹⁵ R. L. Duffus, from *American Regionalism: A Cultural-Historical Approach to National Integration* by Howard W. Odum and Harry Estill Moore, (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1938), p. 554.

¹¹⁶ Wallace Stegner, *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs: Living and Writing in the West*, 1993, <https://archive.org/details/wherebluebirdsin00steg/page/n15/mode/2up?q=youngest+and+freshest>, xv.

¹¹⁷ Samuel Eliot Morison and Henry Steele Commager, from *American Regionalism*, by Howard W. Odum and Harry Estill Moore, p. 577.

West the most interesting case study in American regionalist thought. This impression of the West, which was really a huge collection of disparate subregions, as an American “region among regions,” persisted well into the twentieth century, garnering particular significance in the later Depression years as a symbol of exceptionalism: the West was simultaneously *a part of*, and *apart from*, the rest of the nation.

In the origins of western regionalism, no figure is as inescapable as historian Frederick Jackson Turner. While some few before him— John Wesley Powell, George Catlin, Charles Lummis, to name a few — had helped regionalize the West in the American consciousness, Turner was the first to synthesize American nationalism, exceptionalism, and western regionalism in his “frontier thesis,” delivered first in 1893, under the title “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.” In the thesis, Turner claimed that America’s unique egalitarian spirit, democratic institutions, and strong, coarse, and inquisitive citizens, could be owed to the availability of millions of acres of “free land” in the West. As the fledgling nation expanded westward toward the frontier line, the “meeting point between savagery and civilization,” it continuously underwent a process of “perennial rebirth.”¹¹⁸ Each side left the other permanently transformed. Unfortunately, Turner lamented, this process had finally run its course, evidenced three years prior when the census of 1890 declared that the West had become dotted with “isolated bodies of settlement,” and a frontier line no longer existed.¹¹⁹

Not long after Turner delivered his thesis at the World’s Columbian Exposition to a small crowd of fellow historians, the theory caught fire in American academia,

¹¹⁸ Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/gilded/empire/text1/turner.pdf>, p. 2.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

becoming the most prominent historical accounting of national development. The theory was groundbreaking for three reasons: one, it cut ties with Eurocentric historical models,¹²⁰ effectively creating a new school of American scholarship that no longer depended upon European (in particular, German) academics; two, it offered a convenient historical justification for American exceptionalism—a simple matter of fact that was taken for granted; and three, with the frontier process all played out, everything roughly West of the 100th meridian became a region in its own right—not just any region, but the most “typically American region.”¹²¹ In a sense, Turner had fulfilled an act of reciprocity: the West made the nation exceptional, and now the young midwestern historian had returned the favor.

The first decades of the twentieth century saw Turner continuing to shape the regional West in the public consciousness with his development of the “sectional thesis.” Historian Robert L. Dorman explains Turner’s sectional thesis thusly: “Region-formation happened... when the frontier encountered ‘new geographic Provinces or Regions, founding new regional societies, reacting with the environment to produce sectional ideals and traits differing in each region.’”¹²² Turner’s sectionalism was a kind of proto-regionalism, an environmentally deterministic view of regional life that carried over many ideas from the frontier thesis, in which people’s culture, social attitudes, and

¹²⁰ Before 1893, the prevailing theory of American development was the Teutonic Germ Theory, which took a Eurocentric and racist view of the country’s history, crediting superior Anglo-Saxon ancestry: “The old Anglo-Saxon race is destined to plant amid the wilds of the New World the germs of free institutions, extending over a vast continent.” Both theories took for granted the exceptionalism of American institutions and white settlers.

¹²¹ Frederick Jackson Turner, in Robert L. Dorman’s *Hell of a Vision: Regionalism and the Modern American West*, (Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 2012), p. 12.

¹²² Dorman, *Hell of a Vision*, p. 13.

politics, were shaped by interaction with their natural environment. “There was sectionalism from the beginning” along the Atlantic Coast, Turner believed, and their interaction with the ever-moving frontier line eventually transformed “the West” from a mere “migrating region... a stage of society” to a region in its own right.¹²³ Turner’s sectional thesis fashioned a special place for the West in America’s national identity—no longer merely an empty space where a process played out, but as a unique cultural region in its own right. By the twenties, however, American scholars began to believe that the term “sectionalism” held dangerous connotations— competition, immutable cultural differences, secession, and even civil war— and soon adopted the “regionalism” in its stead. In essence, the two terms meant roughly the same thing: geographic and cultural areas distinct from one another in both “quality and characteristic,” and having a local population who self-identifies in some manner with that space.¹²⁴ But by the twenties and thirties, and still to this day, the section became thought of as the region’s “bad twin,” representing everything that regionalists sought to avoid.¹²⁵

To describe the central dichotomy within western regionalism, Dorman utilizes “nationalist” and “localist” distinctions. Turner’s work embodied the nationalist West, as he believed that the region was the “embodiment of certain *national* myths and ideals, as the most ‘American’ or Anglo-Saxon of the nation’s regions,” and a powerful symbol the

¹²³ Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Section in American History” [1925], *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner: “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” and Other Essays*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/j.ctt32bv5g.13>, pp. 201-2.

¹²⁴ Dorman, *Hell of a Vision*, p. 3.

¹²⁵ Patricia Nelson Limerick, “Region and Reason,” in *All Over the Map: Rethinking America’s Regions*, (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 83.

nation's imperial successes against Indigenous populations.¹²⁶ The localist West, writes Dorman, can be credited to later regionalists who saw the West as a region not necessarily unlike any other region in quality or significance, and as a collection of distinct subregional cultures. In their artistic endeavors, New Deal arts programs grappled with this dualistic quality of the West. Management delegating from the nation's capitol often sought to depict a nationalist West; the artists and writers employed under the WPA often seemed to have a more nuanced view of the region, favoring a localist approach. In the "America Eats" archives, the field material shows a localist approach; the regional essays, written by regional editors on the eve of the war, represented a nationalist approach. Such contradictions could be found in regionalist attitudes toward the West throughout the Depression years: American exceptionalism was both challenged and reaffirmed; the West was at once "just another region," yet reified as the region that thoroughly "epitom[ized]... Americanism."¹²⁷

Depictions of the West in expressive culture of the 1930s wrestled with this conflict of meaning. It was simultaneously a symbol of hope and of desolation; abundance and scarcity; hardship and perseverance; the past and the future. The West featured heavily in popular novels of the period— John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), John Dos Passos' *U.S.A. Trilogy* (1937), and Walter Van Tilburg Clark's *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1940). The western remained one of the most popular film genres, though typically offered uncritical and romantic portraits of the Old West and cowboy life. Some of the most iconic images of the Depression Era exhibited scenes from the

¹²⁶ Dorman, *Hell of a Vision*, p. 11.

¹²⁷ Dorman, *Hell of a Vision*, p. 91

American West, and Dorothea Lange's photographs for the Farm Security Administration (FSA) remain perhaps the most iconic among them, such as the 1938 photograph of a desolate highway called "Westward to the Pacific Ocean," or "Migrant Mother" (1936) of an matriarch and her three children sitting out front of their makeshift migrant camp quarters. The Federal Arts Project (FAP), a sister project to the FWP under the WPA, was responsible for countless murals across the West, in post offices, school houses, and government buildings, which frequently depicted western settlement as if through rose-colored glasses. Despite the varying ways that the West was depicted, one aspect remained constant: everything heralded the national contributions of the common man, the *folk*, and emphasized the strengths of social cooperation.

The Federal Writers' Project (FWP) had a central role in defining the West in the national consciousness. One project in particular, developed again under the careful guidance of Katharine Kellock, sought to portray the West as a region of "vigor, self-sufficiency, and achievement."¹²⁸ *The Oregon Trail: The Missouri River to the Pacific Ocean*, published in 1939 as part of the popular *American Guide Series*, was meant to be an overarching history and guidebook of how "two-million square miles of land... made [the US] one of the mighty powers of all time," effectively reasserting the exceptionalist narrative, presenting the western frontier as the proximate cause of America's success, and building a bridge from the triumphant past of nineteenth-century western settlement to the precarious thirties— a transparent attempt to boost the people's morale. In perfect Turnerarian fashion, the book portrayed the West as having an important and "continuing

¹²⁸ Christine Bold, "The View From the Road: Katharine Kellock's New Deal Guidebooks," *American Studies* 29, No. 2, (Fall, 1988), p. 9.

presence in the spirit of the American people,” proudly exclaiming that “the biological genes that made the United States an empire extending from coast to coast have not been bred out.”¹²⁹

Beyond the realm of culture, New Deal regional development projects had comparatively more efficacy in the West. This was owed to the fact that, broadly speaking, the West of the thirties lacked the infrastructure that most other regions had already developed. The Federal Government was therefore able to exert more influence; in some ways, the West was still a blank slate, which made it appealing to regional planners.¹³⁰ The Civilian Conservation Corps, the Farm Security Administration, rural rehabilitation programs, soil conservation efforts, dam building projects, and more, altogether reshaped the region throughout the decade, beginning a process that continued in earnest through the war years and into the fifties. The Indian New Deal’s impact in the West, remarks Dorman, offered perhaps the best example of something approaching regionalists’ ideal of social planning of anywhere in the nation. The overall transformation of the West due to Federal New Deal efforts cannot be overstated; as historian Richard White writes: “Federal bureaucracies were quite literally remaking the American West [in the thirties]... the scope of the change was staggering. There had been a nearly wholesale retreat from *laissez-faire*.”¹³¹ Ironically, the effect of these regional development efforts in the West by the Federal Government further brought the

¹²⁹ Katharine Kellock, from *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹³⁰ Susan Schulten, “How to See Colorado: The Federal Writers’ Project, American Regionalism, and the ‘Old New Western History,’” *Western Historical Quarterly* 36, No. 1, (Spring, 2005), p. 51, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25443101>.

¹³¹ Richard White, *It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), p. 494.

region under the purview of a centralized state, blurring its regional distinctiveness and relegating Turner's individualist West to something more closely resembling national mythology.

Odum's *American Regionalism* (1938) offered a lengthy examination of the dualistic and contradictory character of the West in the early twentieth century: it was at once believed to be the most quintessentially American of the major regions, and simultaneously the most un-American. It was an un-American region because it was unlike any other region; it represented a history of the continent—evidenced by the continuity of Indian, Spanish, Mexican, and Russian influences—that predated the nation itself; it lacked generically American elements, and was depicted in culture as exotic, even “Oriental” in character;¹³² and the pockets of white civilization that developed along the Pacific Coast maintained an aloofness from the East well into the twentieth century.¹³³ Despite these exceptionalities, the West was simultaneously more representative of the national character than anywhere else:

“Here [in the West] American institutions sharpen into focus so startling as to give the effect, sometimes, of caricature. Here the socioeconomic class conflict is vividly posed in burning silhouettes against the walls of the factory and the hinterland... What America is, [the West] is, with accents, in italics.”¹³⁴

Despite the abandonment of key portions of the frontier thesis by the thirties, much of Turner's conceptualizations of the greater West remained branded into the national psyche, and western regionalism owed itself in large part to his scholarship on the

¹³² For more on the conceptualization of the West as the Orient in popular culture, see *Go East Young Man: Imagining the American West as the Orient* by Richard V. Francaviglia, Logan: Utah State University Press, 2011.

¹³³ Odum, *American Regionalism*, pp. 554-555.

¹³⁴ Idwal Jones, from Odum's *American Regionalism*, p. 555.

frontier, and on American sectionalism. Perhaps even more than the FWP's *Oregon Trail*, "America Eats" treatment of the West was a uniquely Turnerarian project which embodied the connections, as well as the contradictions, inherent in thirties regionalism and America's romance with the West.

The West of "America Eats"— comprised of the Far West and the Southwest— is not anti-modernist nor anti-progress, though portions of the regional essays tend to read that way, but offers an example of the regionalists' desire to marry regional folk traditions with the emergent modern world in a harmonious balance. Like *Oregon Trail*, it built a bridge from a pioneer past to a West that was in the process of being fully incorporated into the rest of the nation. It was a patriotic celebration of the West that embraced its special place in the national character. The "America Eats" project, in particular its treatment of the West, was a fitting regionalism-inspired salve for the widespread cultural anxieties caused by the Depression: it rebuilt a narrative of resource abundance, (a story told since the first European settlers arrived in North America in the sixteenth century); it reaffirmed rural potentialities, thus creating a romantic image of agrarian life and recognizing rural cuisine as comparable to the fine-dining establishments of eastern cities; it portrayed the West as a region of hope for the future; and it held up the West as a mirror to the rest of America, showing them exactly what was possible by mythologizing what had come before.

II. The Frontier of American Cuisine

*“A westerner today is still, by and large, a rugged, physical specimen, an independent, democratic jovial individual given to excesses— generous, boisterous, vigorous. So then are his foods, and his eating and drinking habits.”*¹³⁵

For the continuance of the FWP’s romantic regional odyssey through the American West, the topic of food offered a particularly useful angle from which to approach the journey. Even in the thirties and early forties, an era more modern than the FWP’s national editors wanted to admit, foodways— ingredients and culinary tradition— were often still necessarily regional. Skilled chefs and great cuisine could be found just as often in the humblest of hash-houses as in fine eastern restaurants, and this offered yet another chance to center the virtue of ordinary folk.

Perhaps more than any other cultural artifact, due to its cherished sensory qualities, food was able to conjure in people deep feelings of nostalgia— a powerful emotion in the FWP’s documentation of national identity. Writing about the foodways of the West offered the chance to synthesize themes of regional folk tradition, ethnic pluralism, romantic agrarianism, and American nationalism, in ways that other topics perhaps did not. In other words, “America Eats” offered an accounting of western regional culture through cuisine, written in a vernacular style and accessible to a wide readership, in hopes that an affection for the West would further instill a patriotic love of country.

The “America Eats” project’s treatment of the broad West is complicated by its division into two separate subregions— the Far West, and the Southwest. For the

¹³⁵ Montana Writers' Project, "Far West Regional Essay," Library of Congress, MSS55715, Collection United States Work Projects Administration records, 1524-1975, Box A833, Folder 0006 "America Eats" Notes, Reports and Essays (The Far West), <https://whatamericaate.org/full.record.php?kid=79-2C8-7A6&page=1>, p. 94.

purposes of this paper, we will consider the Middle West just as Howard W. Odum had in *American Regionalism*: a region all its own, not quite the East, nor the West, but sharing certain characteristics with both.¹³⁶ Even more complicating, state lines do not correspond to regional divisions, which are formed through historical processes, geography, and culture rather than as casual political designations. For example, some of the Great Plains states might have been included in “America Eats” Middle West, but nevertheless shared more characteristics in common with the Far West, (and, in at least one instance, material from the Dakotas was cut from the Middle West region and thrown to the Far West by national editors because it was a better fit).¹³⁷ As considered, the regional West has, almost as its primary characteristic, remained amorphous throughout American history, its definitions changing as the frontier settlement process played out. As Turner wrote, “each region reached in the process of expansion from the [east] coast had its frontier experience, was for a time ‘the West.’”¹³⁸ It is necessary then to discuss the Far West and the Southwest together, as well as separately, as they were depicted in the “America Eats” project, in order to garner a better understanding of how the West was broadly utilized by Washington to renew a romantic American self-image, and to search for (or invent) a cohesive portrait of frontier cuisine. Through the foodways of the major western regions, the “America Eats” effort hoped to reintroduce the American people to Turner’s frontier, but with a modern, “social” twist, in line with changing priorities and Roosevelt’s burgeoning social democracy.

¹³⁶ Odum offers a lengthy and complex accounting of the “multiplicity of Wests” and subregional considerations from a sociological perspective in *American Regionalism*, beginning on page 551.

¹³⁷ Bégin, *Taste of the Nation*, p. 33

¹³⁸ Turner, “The Significance of Sections...,” p. 202.

The Far West region as defined by the “America Eats” project incorporated every state west from the Rocky Mountains and north of the Colorado River: Wyoming, Colorado, Idaho, Utah, Nevada, Oregon, Washington, Northern California, and Montana. The Montana Writers’ Project office located in Butte was responsible for compiling and editing the region’s final submission to Washington. Management’s decision to locate the region’s central office somewhere as out-of-the-way as Butte betrays a lack of regional knowledge, and seems to indicate that they chose a location in the most approximate center of the Far West. This was in spite of its distance from all other FWP offices, centers of culture, bureaucracy, or population, and its lack of established writing talent. It might have also been a consequence of the fact that by 1939, more appropriate FWP offices such as the Northern California Writers’ Project in San Francisco had begun to disintegrate, with big talents like Kenneth Rexroth resigning to follow more promising professional opportunities.¹³⁹

Compared to the regions of the East, the South, and the Middle West, the Far West and the Southwest had to make do with a comparative lack of recognized talent, save a few exceptions, such as novelist Vardis Fisher who ran the Idaho Writers’ Project for a short time. Michael Kennedy, a little-known author of western novels and sports newspaper columns, and the less known writer and editor Edward B. Reynolds, were tasked with managing the Far West from the Butte office. Regional directors’ duties included wading through piles of field research— miscellaneous notes, essays, recipes, anecdotes, and simple lists of food dishes— communicating with the state offices under

¹³⁹ Kurlansky, *Food of a Younger Land, A Portrait of American Food... From the Lost WPA Files*, (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009), p. 313.

their purview, following marching orders from Washington, and compiling everything together to write a cohesive essay on the region's foodways.

Like Kellock's *Oregon Trail*, the Far West's regional essay submission was an unambiguous expression of Turner's nationalist West: a rugged environment sculpted a uniquely hearty people, for whom the "nuances of taste and smell" or the "lacy frills" of luxury did not factor into their food culture.¹⁴⁰ The essay hit on many recognizable themes, presenting western foodways as a direct reflection of the West's characteristics—uniquely masculine, robust, and a product of resourcefulness, abundance, and necessity—born in a not-so-distant frontier past. The piece prominently featured the contributions of nineteenth century figures of western lore—mountain men, fur trappers, homesteaders, miners, lumberjacks, cowboys, and Indian scouts—though connected this focus on folklore to an increasingly modern present with the inclusion of culinary contributions of recent immigrant groups, and the incursion of civilization. The document's omission of the struggles of the thirties, in favor of a triumphant frontier past, testified to the purpose of "America Eats" as a boon for patriotism, tourism, and western romance.

To a point, unlike Turner's West, "America Eats" material eagerly emphasized the cultural and ethnic pluralism of the region. After all, regionalists believed that the West represented the "new composite America... the new melting pot," a microcosm of the nation.¹⁴¹ The Far West essay describes instances of cross-ethnic eating, portraying western cuisine as "the result of widespread, working-class, localized

¹⁴⁰ Montana Writers' Project, "Far West Regional Essay," p. 1.

¹⁴¹ Odum and Moore, *American Regionalism*, p. 550.

cosmopolitanisms.”¹⁴² Unlike the elite cosmopolitanism of eastern cities, this was an authentic pluralism of the *people*, a grassroots expression of cross-ethnic solidarity arising organically as ordinary working men set to the task of settling the West. One example refers to the boarding homes of the mining camps as the “greatest centers of [ethnic] assimilation” to be found in America.¹⁴³ Common meals in the mining camps were a great equalizer, binding men together in solidarity with a common purpose, regardless of their ethnic background. The same can be said for “America Eats” treatment of the West broadly: from the cowboy campfires to the mountain town saloons, almost everyone was an outsider in the West, and there was camaraderie to be found in that.

Due to this overarching focus on cultural pluralism, the “melting pot” trope developed new significance in the “America Eats” literature. The metaphor, originating around 1908 to describe a “give and take” between America’s native and immigrant cultures soon came to symbolize the assimilation of immigrants into the national culture.¹⁴⁴ The FWP writers oscillated between the two meanings, and which was used depended upon what ethnic groups were being referred to. The writings hold a posture toward ethnic Europeans that embraced cultural pluralism from the Old World and seemed to truly value their culinary contributions; Asian immigrants were expected to assimilate, their foodways depicted as far too exotic and outside the norms, when they were mentioned at all. Further, the pluralism of the West was not merely one of

¹⁴² Bégin, *Taste of the Nation*, p. 137

¹⁴³ Montana Writers’ Project, “Far West Regional Essay,” p. 13.

¹⁴⁴ Bégin, *Taste of the Nation*, p. 134.

ethnicity, but of workers and settlers from America's regions. As Turner wrote about the West more than a decade previous, the "men" who comprised the population always lived in "two or three states in the course of their migrations" to the West.¹⁴⁵ The Far West essay emphasized the influence of "the original recipes and food habits of pioneer emigrants... from New England, the South, and the Middle West."¹⁴⁶ In the West, it was a point of pride having so many different traditions converging on one space.

Native American culinary influence was portrayed as minimal in the Western regions, their roles confined to wise mentors of the white settlers in the subtle techniques of survival in the harsh environment: "The main thing that [whites learned from Indians] was that they had to eat to live, and a man couldn't be too particular," expressed one passage.¹⁴⁷ In the Pacific Northwest, the Chinook (and other unspecified tribes) were mentioned for their fishing expertise, while "Puget Sound" Indians, tribal designations not included, were praised for their technical skills in catching geoducks.¹⁴⁸ Even the simple practice of building a proper cooking fire was apparently taught to the white pioneer by local Indians.¹⁴⁹ While there was a noticeable lack of regard for Native American cookery and its influence on the culinary traditions of western Americans, there was nevertheless no shortage of field material on the topic. In other words, despite the notable amount of field notes on Indian culture obtained by the field writers, the

¹⁴⁵ Turner, "The Significance of the Section," 203.

¹⁴⁶ Montana Writers' Project, "Far West Regional Essay," pp. 93-94.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 40, 44, 47.

¹⁴⁹ Arthur J. Brooks, "Southwest Regional Essay," 1942, Library of Congress, MSS55715, Collection United States Work Projects Administration records, 1524-1975, Box A833, Folder 0001 "America Eats" Notes, Reports and Essays, the Southwest, <https://whatamericaate.org/full.record.php?kid=79-2C8-793&page=1>, p. 28.

editors in charge of their region's respective contributions made a concerted effort to omit Indian culture from "America Eats," except insofar as they aided white settlers in their mastery over the western landscape.

"America Eats" literature of the West featured Turnerarian-style ruggedness as another important quality of the region's culinary character. As mentioned, the national editors in Washington had hoped that this would become the primary regional theme, as they made specific requests for accounts of,

...mining, cattle raising, and lumbering traditions;... round-up barbecues and big game hunts... primarily male feasts... Colorado' mountain trout suppers; Montana's hunters' dinners; mountain oyster feasts; Nevada's old prospector dinners; Washington's pigeon-pie suppers and salmon barbecues; Oregon loggers' dinners; California pioneer dinners.¹⁵⁰

National editors wanted to see accounts of mythic western caricatures— "virile people... adventurous and hardy," eating wild and exotic game— venison, elk, mountain goats, and even fistfuls of crickets and ants— repudiating unnecessary modern luxuries, and holding informal banquets under the stars.¹⁵¹

The rugged character of the West was intimately tied to the conceptualization of male power and influence— a focus which can be directly tied to the crisis of masculinity which pervaded the country during the Depression years. "America Eats" was an ongoing attempt to "re-masculinize" the country, and reassert male dominance in a

¹⁵⁰ "America Eats Book Proposal and Outline," Montana State University Library, 2336, Collection Montana State University Library, Box 1, Folder 1 Correspondence Washington D.C., Series 1 - America Eats Montana State University Library Collection 2336 - WPA records, 1935-1942 Series 1 - America Eats Box 1 - America Eats - Correspondence Washington D.C.. <https://whatamericaate.org/full.record.php?kid=79-2C8-14D&page=1>, p. 4.

¹⁵¹ Montana Writers' Project, "Far West Regional Essay," pp. 1-3.

decade which found thousands of men out of work and unable to provide for their families.¹⁵² On the conscious decision of food writers to decouple food from domesticity,

Bégin writes:

To increase the patriotic and emotional investment in the nation, New Deal food writing attempted to disjoin food and cooking from its association from women's work, and in doing so inscribed it with a masculine narrative.¹⁵³

This was particularly true in the West, where the symbol of the family domicile was excluded entirely. The most common vignettes found in the field material and the regional essays are men cooking meat over an open flame. At one event, cattlemen demanded “all women out of the kitchen,” thus creating a sacred “all male affair” as they removed, cleaned, and cooked Rocky Mountain oysters, or bull testicles.¹⁵⁴ Distinct from other regions, “a man who dons an apron and enters the kitchen or approaches an outdoor fire is not looked upon with scorn in the West.”¹⁵⁵

The Southwest was comprised of Texas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Arizona, and the Southern half of California, with the city of Phoenix at the editorial helm. The Southwest's regional essay, written by the regional editor Arthur J. Brooks, was only thirty-six pages upon submission—a far cry from the roughly one-hundred pages requested by the national office, and another example of how the shakeups in late 1941 and 1942 caught regional offices off guard. The Southwest also accounted for the smallest amount of field material in the archives, likely owing to the fact that its FWP offices were more sparse and lightly staffed than anywhere else in the country. From the

¹⁵² Bégin, *Taste of the Nation*, p. 62.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

¹⁵⁴ Montana Writer's Project, “Far West Regional Essay,” p. 86.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 86.

expectations from the Washington office, the field material, and however little existed of the regional essay, the region's culinary character is presented nearly identical to the Far West, albeit with one notable exception: the focus on the importance of Mexican food.

What existed of the Southwest's regional essay treated these topics— a rugged landscape, uniquely hardy people, masculinity, strength in multiculturalism— exactly as their northern neighbor had. Southwestern people were likewise said to “[eat] with gusto,” their foodways a result of “pioneer stock... induced by hard living,” and neither did these westerners concern themselves with luxuries of the East such as “formality” or “table manners.”¹⁵⁶ These unrefined food habits were a product of the environment, at once an isolated, sparse, “scrub country,” yet transformed by early settlers into a “veritable Garden of Eden” through generations of agriculture.¹⁵⁷ “Virile” and “hardbitten” men roamed the countryside, as pioneers, miners, hunters, and cattlemen, developing “gargantuan appetites” for “good food” as they went, with “no prejudice toward the manner of its serving.”¹⁵⁸ Like the rest of the West, the depiction of the Southwest was meant to be a reassertion of the Turnerarian worldview and a reaffirmation of America as a land of spiritual freedom— there was no regional romance more potent than that of America with its West.

¹⁵⁶ Arthur J. Brooks, "Southwest Regional Essay," p. 1.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

III. Inventing Authenticity

The Far West regional essay is especially useful for two reasons. First, unlike the other regional submissions to the national office, Reynold's and Kennedy's draft was written to the specified length. Second, on at least two occasions, the national editors used the Far West's submission as an example for the other regions to strive for, in tone, style, and content. We may contrast this with the Middle West essay by Nelson Algren, for example. The manuscript which Algren submitted to the Washington FWP office was titled "A short history of American diet"; one editor scrawled in pencil on the front page of the copy "wrong— This was supposed to be a study of group eating... Best example of what was waited for regional essay prepared by Montana"— a referring to the Far West's contribution.¹⁵⁹ From this can be gleaned that the completed "America Eats" book would have much more closely resembled the Far West's submission.

The issue remained that Algren's essay objectively remains far more authentic, well-researched, and well-written, accounting of his region's foodways. The essay was ahead of its time, anticipating the historical food writing of later generations. It began with a description of environmental factors and Native American cuisine— many pages are dedicated to how Indigenous people lived in the Middle West before European contact. Algren flirts with a discussion of the negative ramifications that white settlement had on Indian culture: "The modifications effected by the Indian and frontiersman upon

¹⁵⁹ "The Middle West Regional Essay," Library of Congress, MSS55715, Collection United States Work Projects Administration records, 1524-1975, Box A833, Folder 0004 "America Eats" Notes, Reports and Essays (The Middle West), <https://whatamericaeat.org/full.record.php?kid=79-2C8-79F&page=1>, p. 1.

each other's diets were reciprocal. The Indian taught the white man to exist in the wilderness... the frontiersman instructed the Indian in the fastest known methods of getting blind drunk on barrel-whiskey."¹⁶⁰ Algren had written a legitimate documentary piece of food history and an ethnography of regional foodways; Washington was hoping for romantic literature, such as that of Reynolds and Kennedy. After all, as Bégin writes, "the federal office would... ultimately [be] the judge of the accuracy, relevance, and literary value of the regional essays."¹⁶¹

Beyond style and substance, national editors often sought to gate-keep regional identity itself, placing them at odds with the provincials who knew their respective regions better than urban liberals of the East. As Bégin writes, while final deadlines loomed, the national editors developed an increasingly "peremptory" tone in their appeals for specific kinds of material that reflected *their* conceptions of regional folk cultures, sometimes at the expense of realities on the ground.¹⁶² The end grew closer and the national office increasingly suggested events for each region to cover: the Southwest was told that, "suitable subjects might include a buckaroo squatting by the cook-kettle, a camp cook recklessly throwing ingredients into a son-of-a-bitch stew, and a mongrel running off with part of a sheep-herder's dinner."¹⁶³ Another request stipulated that the Far West must cover game dinners, a Mormon Ward gathering, or a roundup barbecue.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁰ Nelson Algren, *America Eats* [Middle West Regional Essay], Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992, p. 8.

¹⁶¹ Bégin, *Taste of the Nation*, p. 24.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 32-33.

¹⁶³ Walter M. Kiplinger, "Southwest Region Correspondence," p. 2.

¹⁶⁴ Bégin, *Taste of the Nation*, 33.

Finally, in the quest for authentic American cuisine, there was a giant elephant in the room: the search may have taken place too late. The industrialization of America's foodways, the homogenization of the nation by the spread of mass culture, and the transformation wrought by global capitalism, had reached almost every corner of the country—including the beloved West—and had largely “forced out” traditional regional cooking.¹⁶⁵ As Washington demanded “America Eats” conform to a nostalgic memory of homemade cuisines and folk customs, researchers in the field were discovering the ubiquity of hot dogs, popcorn, and canned goods. Instead of buffalo barbecues and buckwheat cakes desired by the national editors, field writers found that “ordinary pancakes, served with sausage, [were] much more representative.”¹⁶⁶ The more it became clear that the project was threatened by conservative attacks, defunding efforts, and a looming war, national editors increasingly sought to impose their idealized renderings of regional cultures, rather than relying upon the evidence gathered by hundreds of FWP employees in the field.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 34.

¹⁶⁶ Rudolph Umland, “Nebraska Memorandum,” 1941, Library of Congress, MSS55715, Collection United States Work Projects Administration records, 1524-1975, Box A830, Folder 2 “America Eats” Correspondence, Dec. 1941, <https://whatamericaate.org/full.record.php?kid=79-2C8-4CA&page=1>, p. 1.

¹⁶⁷ Bégin, *Taste of the Nation*, p. 32.

Conclusion

I. The “Century of the Common Man”¹⁶⁸

“You are part of this nation, and this nation is part of you.”¹⁶⁹

America’s entry into the war had an affect of almost total cultural, social, and economic consolidation; it seemed as if every American had turned their eyes outward, visualizing a single unity of purpose. No longer was it enough for common people to find their sense of place in provincial backwaters, to each have their own quaint regions with local cultures and dialects; the people became *the nation’s people*; the land became *the nation’s land*. It was, after all, ordinary people who would be sent to fight, to protect the nation and the homeland. No matter what region one called home, it all belonged to America— and America was defined by its national mythology, not its regional pluralism. Strong-willed men, an egalitarian democracy, a rugged landscape and a big, open sky— the mythological qualities of the West accentuated America’s exceptionalist character. As one historian would later observe, “region is a mental act and region is real, at one and the same time.”¹⁷⁰ The nation that had faith in the Turnarian mythos would be a nation that emerged from the war victorious.

¹⁶⁸ Vice President Henry A. Wallace, in reference to the beginning of the war and the resistance to Nazi Germany, quoted in David A. Horowitz *The People’s Voice: A Populist Cultural History of Modern America*, Cornwall-on-Hudson: Sloan, 2008, p. 197.

¹⁶⁹ Rexford Tugwell, from Greg Grandin’s *The End of the Myth, From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America*, (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2016), p. 177.

¹⁷⁰ Patricia Nelson Limerick, from Neil Campbell’s *The Rhizomatic West: Representing the American West in a Transnational, Global, Media Age*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), muse.jhu.edu/book/11849, p. 41.

Perhaps the nation's wartime consumption of raw material, manpower, and cultural expression is what National Poet Laureate Allen Tate anticipated when he referred to America as "that all-destroying abstraction." Folklorist B. A. Botkin had hoped aloud in 1936 that regionalist expression had helped to destroy the destroyer by initiating a new period in American history based upon an appreciation for regional folk cultures and an almost spiritual connection to the simplicities of home... but Botkin had not accounted for the extenuating external forces that arose a few years later.¹⁷¹ The all-destroying abstraction had a predictable effect on the Writers' Program and, by extension, the "America Eats" project; it destroyed them.

II. Revising National Priorities

*"We dribbled out without anyone even saying goodbye."*¹⁷²

As the nation's attention shifted from Depression recovery to the war effort, the Writers' Program (previously the FWP) and other arts programs under the WPA increasingly became a lightning rod for conservative critics. To a growing number of Americans, the federal foray into the arts was an evocative symbol of waste, insidious communist influence, and distraction from other priorities. At best, federal arts patronage was characterized as a boondoggle, "unimportant" and "trivial" work;¹⁷³ at worst,

¹⁷¹ B.A. Botkin, "Regionalism: Cult or Culture?" *The English Journal* 25, No. 3, (March, 1936), p. 184.

¹⁷² Katharine Kellock, from David A. Taylor's *Soul of a People: The WPA Writers' Project Uncovers Depression America*, (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), p. 220.

¹⁷³ Bernard de Voto, from *Ibid.*, p. 347.

“shadowy New Deal administrators... were plotting a “glorified worldwide WPA.””¹⁷⁴

Such criticisms grew more cacophonous as the situation in Europe deteriorated, though the attack at Pearl Harbor in December of 1941 put an end to the conversation once and for all. The Writers’ Program, renamed the Writers’ Unit of the War Services Subdivision of the WPA in May of 1942, was reduced to a skeleton of its former self, repurposed for wartime propaganda and “Servicemen’s Recreation Guides” for incoming green recruits. Creatively, the project was dead.

The dismantling of the Writers’ Program was an unceremonious affair. Even by the summer of 1941, ironically at the same moment the majority of “America Eats” research was taking place, the folklorist B.A. Botkin had announced glumly that “the [Writers’] project was getting put away in storage.”¹⁷⁵ Most saw the writing on the wall as the arts programs were slowly picked apart— a process that was exacerbated in early 1942. John D. Newsom dispatched a short memorandum to the state offices: “The present crisis will undoubtedly mean laying aside many current activities of the Writers’ Program and many activities planned for the immediate future”; and quietly resigned his position as head director of the Writers’ Program to join the US Army.¹⁷⁶ The few remaining employees in the Washington office collected paychecks long enough to box up the remaining material— field research, notes, correspondences, and project drafts—

¹⁷⁴ David A. Horowitz, *America’s Political Class Under Fire: The Twentieth Century’s Great Culture War*, (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 85.

¹⁷⁵ B. A. Botkin, in Jerrold Hirsch’s *Portrait of America: A Cultural History of the Federal Writers’ Project*, (Chapel Hill, North Carolina University Press, 2003), p. 235.

¹⁷⁶ John D. Newsom, from Jerre Mangione’s *The Dream and the Deal: The Federal Writers’ Project, 1935-1943*, (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1972), p. 347.

and find safe places to store it for posterity. Finally, they were ushered out the door “without anyone even saying goodbye,” said Katharine Kellock.¹⁷⁷

Kellock had spent much of those last two years of her tenure trying to save the Writers’ Program from defunding, publicly countering the onslaught of attacks from critics. “Some officials and superficial commentators,” Kellock decried as early as 1940, “[have already begun] to estimate how many planes could be purchased with sums spent by the government for less tangible items.”¹⁷⁸ Kellock implored the public to see the program’s worth as she did, writing that Americans’ “understanding of... heritage and culture” was an imperative— they would soon be asked to defend it with their very lives.¹⁷⁹ Kellock was prideful of the FWP’s accomplishments; not as a mere relief program for thousands of white-collar workers, but for the quality of their work, in particular the huge body of literature that comprised the *American Guide Series*. To Kellock, the series was different from anything that had come before: their earnest “mile-by-mile treatment” of the US revealed truths that “neither the historians nor the imaginative writers of the past had discovered.”¹⁸⁰ In her estimation, the intimate folk knowledge that the writers uncovered was priceless, and she warned that if Americans did not understand their own country, when the war finally came to an end, they will have “lost their soul trying to save it.”¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁷ Katharine Kellock, from David A. Taylor’s *Soul of a People*, p. 220.

¹⁷⁸ Katharine Kellock, “The WPA Writers: Portraitists of the United States,” *The American Scholar* 9, No. 4, (Fall, 1940), p. 482.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 482.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 474.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 482.

In spite of Kellock's concerns, as external enemies came into focus, the social milieu that had influenced much of the Depression Era's cultural expression faded away and was replaced with an unambiguous nationalism. The country was envisioned as a single unit, not characterized by such regionalist values as soft cultural plurality or idyllic agrarian countrysides; America's strength now lay in political centralization, unquestioning social cohesion, modern industrial and technological superiority, and military might. Even leading regionalists—the scholars and intellectuals who had led the sociocultural revolution of the thirties—began to favor a new approach, utilizing the romance of the region as a way to bolster wartime nationalism. “One cannot counter the religious faith of fascism,” said utopian regionalist and one of the era's leading intellectuals Lewis Mumford, “unless one possesses a faith equally strong, equally capable of fostering devotion and loyalty, and commanding sacrifice.”¹⁸² To Mumford, devotion to country required a “mystical” nationalism anchored to “the land, the region, the local community, and the family.”¹⁸³ As Richard Pells explains, Mumford's sentiment was part of a trend in the early 1940s in which intellectuals subordinated their interest in continuing America's “cultural rebirth” to supporting the war effort at all costs.¹⁸⁴

If Mumford's repurposing of regionalist rhetoric seems familiar, we have seen it before: promoting a “mystical” nationalism through the use of evocative sensory nostalgia for land and region is precisely what the “America Eats” project aimed to do.

¹⁸² Lewis Mumford, from Richard Pells's *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 360.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 360.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 361.

In this way, Kellock anticipated the need for a strong nationalist sentiment among the people as she delegated from Washington in the summer and fall of 1941. It seems fair to say that what resulted in the regional essay drafts was not the project that had originally been conceived in 1937— a project that more closely resembled the faithful folk culture collections undertaken by such regionalists as B. A. Botkin, Alan Lomax, and Zora Neal Hurston. Its style and purpose had predictably transformed with the times. A combination of pressures from conservatives to defund federal arts programs, accusations of a communist plot hiding among the New Deal social liberals, and crescendoing anxieties over the war had transformed the project from a social-scientific regionalist research project to romantic expression of land and country through a largely mythologized accounting of foodways.

III. The Decline of Regionalism

“...the concept of region is history’s divining rod. No one’s quite sure how it does what it does, yet it leads them to discoveries. Or does it?”¹⁸⁵

Just as New Deal arts programs accumulated a growing mob of critics, regionalism’s detractors grew more numerous in the war and postwar years. As the US began to emerge as a global superpower, the dominant culture no longer had much use for the the antiquated ideas that regionalism entailed. The decline of regionalism was partially a consequence of the inevitable march of progress, but also had a great deal to do with regionalism’s inherent contradictions and deficiencies. Ultimately, regionalists

¹⁸⁵ Robert L. Dorman, “History’s Divining Rod,” *Reviews in American History* 25, No. 3, (Sept. 1997), p. 369.

had failed to offer a viable alternative to an increasingly modern, industrial, and urban America. However, historians agree that regionalists of the thirties left behind a framework of intellectual thought which is still utilized today, and a body of art, literature, music, folklore studies, and academic scholarship, that rivals anything that had come before, or has come since.

Regionalism as it existed in the thirties could not survive in postwar America. There is perhaps no reason more simple than this: regionalist expression dealt almost exclusively with an “ordered and happier past,” at the expense of the “disorder and disturbance of the present.”¹⁸⁶ As one critic wrote, regionalist thought generally ran “...counter to technological aspects of society which are universal and dominant and will eventually prevail over discordant folkways,” and sought to stop the “driving force of history.”¹⁸⁷ The antimodernist tendency of the regionalists, generally speaking, presented an important irony: for all the obsession with tradition and an idealized national history, regionalism is an entirely *modern* idea, for as Susan Schulten reminds us, “the urge to salvage local culture *is itself* a product of modern life.”¹⁸⁸ So, as regionalists sought to help an ailing country by returning to a simpler past, they used concepts in common with

¹⁸⁶ Michael C. Steiner, “Regionalism in the Great Depression,” *Geographical Review* 73, No. 4, (Oct. 1983), p. 437.

¹⁸⁷ Walter M. Kollmorgen, “Crucial Deficiencies of Regionalism,” *The American Economic Review* 35, No. 2, (May, 1945), p. 377; Robert L. Dorman, *Revolt of the Provinces: The Regionalist Movement in America, 1920-1945*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993, p. 283.

¹⁸⁸ Susan Schulten, “How To See Colorado: The Federal Writers’ Project, American Regionalism, and the ‘Old New Western History,’” *Western Historical Quarterly* 36, No. 1, (Spring, 2005), p. 65-66,

the modernist movement such as faith in cultural radicalism and artistic experimentation.¹⁸⁹

The modernist experimentation that inspired the regionalist movement was perhaps one explanation for another crucial deficiency: its multiplicity of meaning threatened to render the term utterly useless. Critics believed that this was precisely the reason that regionalists were never able to display their “accumulative experience or knowledge,” nor show a “unity of purpose or method.”¹⁹⁰ In fact, the more that was written on the topic, the more confused it seemed to become. This confusion often led to a scenario in which regionalism was offered up as a solution to nearly all of society’s problems, as Howard W. Odum well demonstrated in this passage:

The significance of regionalism as the key to equilibrium is reflected in an extraordinarily wide range of situations, such as the conflict between nationalism and internationalism, between sectionalism and federalism, and the imbalance between agrarian and urban life, between agriculture and industry, between individuation and socialization in government trends, between a quantity civilization of standardizing forces and a quality world, between machines and men.¹⁹¹

According to Odum and other proponents, the pitfalls of free-market capitalism, the consequences of industry, and the inefficacy of government, could all be solved by the perfect compromise that was the regionalist program... if only someone outside of their circle of intellectuals would listen.

¹⁸⁹ Charles Reagan Wilson, “American Regionalism in a Postmodern World,” *American Studies* 42, No. 2, (1997), p. 148.

¹⁹⁰ Kollmorgen, “Crucial Deficiencies of Regionalism,” p. 382.

¹⁹¹ Howard W. Odum, *American Regionalism: A Cultural-Historical Approach to National Integration*, (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1938), p. 5.

This brings us to perhaps the most important deficiency of regionalism: its failure to appeal to ordinary Americans. “Regionalism didn’t deeply affect anyone who didn’t read,” claimed the academic Henry Nash Smith, “It was a fluttering of literary dovescotes and the schemes of a few well-intentioned intellectuals and planners.”¹⁹² The relationship of ordinary people to regionalism in the thirties appears to be unselfconscious: as discussed in Chapter 1, ordinary Americans indeed sought the comforts of *place* amid the anxieties of the 1930s. Ordinary people latched onto country-western music, rural everyman heroes in film, agrarian romance novels, and an Americana aesthetic. The rural depopulation trends after WWI reversed during the 1930s, and there seemed to be a reemergence of extended family and community connectedness. Despite the extent that ordinary Americans sought comfort in Norman Rockwell’s down-home illustrational style did not mean that they had latched onto the larger regionalist movement as it existed in the minds of its national champions. Leading regionalist intellectuals failed to reach the *folk*, beyond some “civic proselytizing” and “cultural radicalism.”¹⁹³ In retrospect, it seemed as if ordinary people experienced their sense of place as an “unreflective immersion in the grandeur of the earth... no more noticed than the circumambient air”; an ironic observation, given that the regionalist worldview was entirely dependent upon the enthusiastic participation of American folk.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹² Henry Nash Smith, from Steiner’s “Regionalism in the Great Depression,” *Geographical Review*, p. 437.

¹⁹³ Dorman, *Hell of a Vision*, p. 91.

¹⁹⁴ Yi-Fu Tuan, from Steiner’s “Regionalism in the Great Depression,” *Geographical Review*, pp. 437-438.

Aside from a comparatively minor resurgence—a variety called bioregionalism, which took an ardent environmentalist, politically radical, and even secessionist approach to regional identity—regionalism largely exists now as an analytical tool for historians. Just as in the 1930s, regionalism is at once an artistic aesthetic, a topic of historical study, and structural framework with which to study other historical subjects. The concept of the region is particularly useful for transcending other definitional categories, leading to some of the most “productive contemporary ruminations on imperialism, cosmopolitanism, nationalism, and the spread of a potentially homogenizing global economy.”¹⁹⁵ For this reason, regionalism has seen a resurgence in the field of history since the 1980s and 1990s. However, if utilized as a topic of study in its own right, regionalism can be more than a tool or a framework, but as a necessity to understanding the multi-partisan, interdisciplinary, and broad cultural reaction to the homogenizing effects of the modern world. If not for the war, regionalism might have amounted to more than an obscure historical footnote; after all, almost all roads lead back to regionalism.

IV. Turner’s Return

*“All this is merely America, only more so.”*¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁵ Stephanie Foote, “The Cultural Work of American Regionalism,” *A Companion to the Regional Literatures of America*, ed. Charles L. Crow, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003, p. 38.

¹⁹⁶ Earl Pomeroy, from Howard R. Lamar’s “Earl Pomeroy: Historian’s Historian,” *Pacific Historical Review* 56, No. 4, (Nov. 1987), p. 552.

Regionalists of the thirties were captivated by the idyllic agrarian ideal. Looking beyond the 100th meridian, many regionalists believed that they saw the potential for a fresh start. The West was America: American refined; America distilled down to its essence, America as it should have been. Western regionalists believed that the land of the West existed without the modern blemishes of urbanization, industrial pollution, mass culture, political corruption, nor class divisions, that characterized much the rest of the nation. There was a sense that, amid the drawbacks of modern life in the East, or the sectionalist history of the South, here was an huge swath of land where Americans could build their Jeffersonian vision of small-scale ownership, artisan production, and idyllic countrysides.

Of course, much of this was largely fantasy. Corporate America had long been invested in the West, as had the Federal Government. Major cities existed along the Pacific Coast, burdened with the same urban plights as their eastern counterparts. The popular idea of the West as a land for the taking had always been a convenient untruth that allowed big mining, timber, agricultural interests, and white settlers, to lay hold of what they desired at the expense of the indigenous populations who lived there.

In spite of this reality, the West, and by extension the concept of the frontier, have long been the most important symbols of American distinctiveness and exceptionalism. As Robert Dorman writes, America's pioneers were believed to have always existed always "closest to the soil and its influences," and furthest away from the homogenizing "urban-industrial" influences of the East.¹⁹⁷ The irony is that the pioneers played a major role in bringing eastern "civilization" westward, in effect threatening the existence of

¹⁹⁷ Dorman, *Revolt of the Provinces*, p. 84.

western folk cultures. Further, despite the image of the rugged, independent, even Herculean western man, history would have it that “the Westerner has been fundamentally an imitator rather than innovator... often the most ardent of conformists.”¹⁹⁸

For a brief moment in the early thirties, the image of the Turnerarian West as the “cradle of the American Dream” was called into question by noteworthy intellectuals—many of them regionalists—who had watched the country’s institutions crumble under the economic stress test, and had witnessed a deep spiritual malaise set in among the people.¹⁹⁹ Lewis Mumford, for one, once believed that the frontier individualism trumpeted by Turner had betrayed natural human values of social community and ultimately hindered American cultural development. A change in public consciousness on this topic—the popular values, lifestyles, and attitudes of the folk—might have been the only way for the country to pull itself away from the brink of disaster. The mythology of the frontier West, which had long been the single most important story in the national narrative, lost much of its cultural capital in the early years of the crisis. The Turnerarian narrative was turned on its head, as the Roosevelt Administration and its allies set about building something of a social democracy—transformative, though not revolutionary. The door had been left ajar, allowing for return of Turnarian mythology.

Over the decade, frontier mythology slowly crept back in to accommodate the psychological needs of an anxious American populace; wartime buildup saw Turner’s romantic frontier return in full force. In this transformative process, America’s entrance

¹⁹⁸ Earl Pomeroy, from *Hell of a Vision: Regionalism and the Modern American West* by Robert L. Dorman, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012), p. 114.

¹⁹⁹ Pells, *Radical Visions*, 24.

into the war became the point of no return. As one historian writes, the attack refocused all of America's energies, and grew the power of the Federal Government as it raised taxes, rationed food and materials, requisitioned industries, and drafted young men into armed services.²⁰⁰ The process continued in the postwar era, which saw a flurry of development of the West—highways, hydroelectric dams, a budding tourism industry, etc.—as it made its final transformation into a regional economic powerhouse, on par with the rest of the nation. The folk cultures that had existed beyond the 100th meridian were only important insofar as they represented quality of “individualism as [the] national virtue.”²⁰¹

V. Comfort Food

*“What [a man] wants is nature in captivity as she has been tamed by civilization. Deliver him from nature in her wild, rude state.”*²⁰²

There is no doubt that regionalism had a profound influence on mainstream intellectual thought in the Depression Era, in particular the New Deal arts programs. Regionalism induced an eagerness in the intellectual class to document America's regional folk cultures, and to reimagine the national character based upon the qualities of regional plurality. In the traditions of the folk, they believed they had discovered the key to social cohesion. Regionalism was a project of romantic nation-building, well in line

²⁰⁰ Grandin, *The End of the Myth*, p. 179.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 168-169.

²⁰² Si Stoddard, "Nature in her Wild State," 1941, Montana State University Library, 2336, Collection Montana State University Library, Box 1, Folder 4 Field Research Materials (Rejected), Series 1 - America Eats Montana State University Library Collection 2336 - WPA records, 1935-1942 Series 1 - America Eats Box 1 - America Eats - Field Research Materials (Rejected). <https://whatamericaate.org/full.record.php?kid=79-2C8-239&page=1>, p.1.

with international trends which had been an integral part of the creation of national movements since global capitalism and industrialization had transformed the world:

The appreciation of beauty and the prioritization of senses and emotion exalted in Romanticism have forged or strengthened the link between the environment and people in our understanding; pure air of the mountain range makes mountain people pure; wind-swept lands covered with heath make people sturdy. As industrialization gathered pace, repulsion against urban pollution led to the idealization of the rural.²⁰³

Food was a useful way to strengthen the link between the people and their environment—far more tangible and universal than the regional art, literature, or the academic works that characterizes much the Depression Era’s regionalist movement. “America Eats” was the first time that a nationalist food project had been undertaken in the states, and to this end, Americans were playing catch-up with other nationalist movements— the French, the English, the Germans, etc.— who had long been celebrating the link between cuisine and national identity. The need to foster a strong romantic sentiment among the American people produced a work that used food as one way to reassert the qualities of the western man as the quintessential American.

Failing to appeal to ordinary Americans— the all-important *folk*— regionalists were working backwards from an assumed conclusion: that ordinary people had instinctively rediscovered an appreciation for the land which they inhabited— the communities they built, the ground they cultivated, and the sights, sounds, and smells that reminded them of home— and that this appreciation would naturally lead people to a more thoughtful, happier, and meaningful life in America. This was the goal of the regionalist intellectuals who staffed the upper echelons of the WPA arts programs: to

²⁰³ Atsuko Ichijo, Venetia Johannes, Ronald Ranta, *The Emergence of National Food: The Dynamics of Food and Nationalism*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, p. 7.

seek out the evidence for what they believed they already knew. In the face of economic collapse, the *people* had once again embraced the true essence of life, an idyllic agrarian Americana far away from the pollution of the cities, the noise of the factories, and cultural, social, and economic poverty of industrial capitalism. “America Eats,” in the words of historian Camille Bégin, was a work of sensory nostalgia which attempted to describe this process, and the eventual collapse of the Writers’ Program and the failure of the project, perfectly encapsulated the failings of regionalism more broadly: something that is “lived” and “experienced” rather than “deliberately known,” cannot be cultivated except by the grassroots, by the folk, themselves.

In “America Eats” and the American Guide Series, we can see this tension clearly: the federal experts had the final say in what made the cut, pulled selectively from the mountains of local information provided by the provincial writers.²⁰⁴ Federal editors imposed a “sensory mapping” of America’s regions from the top down, often sacrificing the truth—the ubiquity of industrial foodstuffs—for a romantic regionalist perspective more in line with national myths.²⁰⁵ The editors of “America Eats” sacrificed the truth of scientific regionalism for a romantic regionalism which sought to construct folk caricatures that served a larger nationalist project. Insofar as there was a final product in the regional essays of the West, “America Eats” was a work of nostalgia: a “defense mechanism” responding to “accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals”; a total “abdication of personal responsibility,” and a project which confused a “phantom

²⁰⁴ Schulten, “How to See Colorado,” p. 66.

²⁰⁵ Bégin, *Taste of the Nation*, p. 32.

homeland” for a real, more complex, and perhaps more disenchanting modern American West.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁶ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, (New York: Basic Books, 2009), p. xiv.

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