Introduction

A Culture of Our Own

The present revolt against the domination exercised over art and letters and over much of our thinking by Eastern capitals of finance and politics brings up many considerations that ought to be discussed. . . . Our Middle West, and indeed the “provinces” in general have long had much the same attitude toward the East that the coastal cities had toward Europe. . . . But the colonial spirit is, of course, basically an imitative spirit, and we can have no hope of developing a culture of our own until that subserviency is put in its proper historical place.1

In 1935, Grant Wood, the artist of “American Gothic,” published a pamphlet titled “Revolt Against the City.” In it, Wood expressed the strong regionalist impulses which emerged not just in the United States, but around the world as well during the inter-war years, after the First World War had subverted western Europe’s claim to the pinnacle of human potential.2 In the wake of this fragmentation, there was a global impulse to locate, define, and strengthen local cultures. Throughout Asia and Africa, independence movements began in explorations of traditional cultures which, after World War Two, led to political decolonization. In the American South, cultural spokesmen such as the Fugitives sought in the Confederate past a means of coalescing a regional culture. In all of these places, the locals could position themselves in opposition to an empire which had, in some form, dictated the terms whereby local culture had been either marginalized or erased in the metropolitan culture of the empire. All, then, made reference to a pretext of nationalism around which to base a reconstructed local culture.

Unlike the other more obviously colonized groups, Wood and other
Midwestern regionalists lacked a past of local nationalism. Nonetheless, Wood seized the terms of colonization and provincialism to describe the Midwest, albeit without reference to an analogous political separatism or nationalism. That is, he links the condition of the Midwest to its past as a cultural and economic colony and then demands the initiation of a process of cultural decolonization which exists apart from political secession. By Wood’s reckoning, the struggle for “a culture of our own” was facing the same obstacles which confronted local cultures throughout the colonized and postcolonial worlds: overcoming a culture of imperialism that had most effectively colonized by inculcating local provinciality and delocalizing the idea of nation.

The assumptions Wood makes—that American regions are colonies, that local culture must be distinct from the national—derive from one hundred and fifty years of history since the first American settlement of what would become his “Middle West.” To understand how Wood’s generation perceived the need to decolonize the Midwest, we must begin by studying how the “colonial spirit” developed its “subservience” and imitativeness. At the same time, we must explore how and why “the domination exercised over art and letters and over much of our thinking by Eastern capitals” came to be. American colonialist policies and Midwestern colonial “subserviency” began in the Old Northwest, the subject of this book.
region’s borders. The changing borders imagined by actual Old Northwesterners mark the geography I use.

But this book is not just about a region; it is also about the nation of which it is a part. In whatever map of the Old Northwest we use, this region is important to understanding how the United States has become a collection of many diverse regions at the same time it has become a strongly unified nation. As global economies and technologies decentralize the nation’s economics and politics in the early twenty-first century, we again are at a moment when a consideration of local culture is in order. Furthermore, as fewer and fewer Americans are exposed to national institutions—such as the Armed Services—the sense of common national experience which characterized earlier historical periods through intimate interregional contact has diminished. In response, media outlets, such as the Fox News Network and Time-Warner, often produce different regional editions of their publications and television programs. While these examples might seem superficial, geared more toward attracting customer loyalty than taking those differences seriously, they acknowledge and demonstrate patterns of interest based in local deviation from the national standard. Last, the National Endowment for the Humanities has recently announced an aggressive funding program for regional cultural centers, a distinction which has rarely characterized its granting patterns. With the Cold War over, the national compulsion to assert a singular national identity seems to have waned, creating a context for exploring the origins and significance of sub-national distinctions based on race, class, gender, and, I would add, region.

In the past few years, cultural historians in many fields have turned their attention to how and why national culture in the nineteenth century came to be dominated by the Northeast. One of the most important of these, Anne Goldman’s *Continental Divides: Revisioning American Literature*, focuses mostly on the interaction of Californian and American literatures in the late nineteenth century. She frames her argument, though, in terms which reflect my own. She begins:

What does American literature beyond the Mason-Dixon line look like? From the perspective of the Old North Church, there really isn’t one. . . . We are generally less inclined to honor the discrete particularities of local places than we are to interpret “the local” as metonymic of some conception of the
national “whole.” . . . As conventionally figured, diverse US regions all too often are framed as equivalent of time zones in a chronology of empire, the eastern wilderness chastised by the Puritans, the western spaces made penitent a little later by their pioneer descendants.5

Furthermore, theories of American regionalism which focus on the “South,” Goldman wrote, do “little to unseat New England’s continued status as center of the United States and originary metaphor for national identity” (3) and so reiterate that “our national literature’ remains centered within the culture of New England” (5). However, Goldman resists the language of “postcolonialism” to frame New England’s dominance—Boston as the center of the American empire the way London was the center of the British one. Indeed, California’s centuries of occupation by Spanish imperialists prior to 1848 and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo make it a bad fit for such a rigid definition of the postcolonial. Such a denial, however, overlooks both ideas such as Grant Wood’s identification of the “Middle West” as a colony and less rigidly theorized definitions of postcolonialism. Indeed, Goldman’s assumption that other regions might not fit into a colonial paradigm undermines her own identification of “the historical idiosyncrasies of the American continent” (3). Within such a matrix of idiosyncrasies, I argue, some regions might be understood more fully by reconsidering them as colonies, especially when, as is often the case in the texts studied in this book, the participants on both sides—both Easterners and Old Northwesterners—self-consciously framed their activities against and within European models of empire, and announced such an intent in their writings.

An American Colony seeks to redirect these discussions by reviving Wood’s notion that the Midwest and perhaps other “provinces” began as colonies. In the current era of global decolonization, the idea of what had constituted a “colony” has been explored in great detail. Tracking “colonial” Old Northwestern culture in light of these developments reveals much about how the United States conceived of itself as both nation and empire, and how regions both welcomed and resisted assimilation into a “composite national identity,” in the words of Frederick Jackson Turner.6 In other words, studying a region’s relationship to its nation can reveal much about each. The Old Northwest was the first American—as opposed to British—colony in North America.7 Its problematic and fluid relationship to that “composite” national idea during the nineteenth
century reveals much about the beginnings and operations of American colonialism, imperialism, regionalism, and, most importantly, nationalism.

In the late eighteenth century, the Old Northwest was the first place where the new post-Revolutionary nation endeavored a coherent program of expansion. As long ago as 1888, B. A. Hinsdale studied its development as essential to understanding how the nation as a whole imagined the processes and risks of expansion: “It was the original public domain, and the part of the West first colonized under the authority of the National Government. It was the first and most important Territory ever organized by Congress. It is the only part of the United States ever under a secondary constitution like the Ordinance of 1787.” By such a reckoning, the Old Northwest was the first testing ground for how well ideas like republicanism, nationalism, and capitalism would travel. In this region, big questions concerning the future of the nation were at stake: How could a nation that had announced itself by rejecting a colonial “mother country” colonize new territory itself? How could a government based on local self-determination determine policies for people on the other side of a mountain range? Would American settlers reject their marginality as had the British colonials? Would the Old Northwest’s many historical, demographic, and topographical differences from the Atlantic seaboard complicate the transplantation of Eastern values and institutions?

An American Colony addresses these questions by employing ideas drawn from the study of other “settlement” colonies in the English-speaking world. Nineteenth-century shifts in the methodologies of British colonialism bear out the historical grounding of such a comparative perspective. The American Revolution made the British question their own prior colonial policies and, when they colonized Australia, New Zealand, and Canada during the same decades Americans were colonizing the Old Northwest, they employed somewhat parallel policies of land distribution and social organization. Unlike the Old Northwest, however, those settlement colonies have been discussed as having “postcolonial” qualities. The study of them has been vitalized by viewing their local cultures through the prism of longstanding tensions concerning their entangled and complex relation to the empire of which they had been parts. Meanwhile the Old Northwest’s regional culture
Introduction

has gone relatively ignored, thought to have entered seamlessly into the American nation.12

American regions in general have been represented as interlocking components of the world’s superpower, their striking differences and local problems usually considered as subjects of only parochial or trivial interest.13 Denied the place-specific distinctiveness based in nationalism which energizes the study of other former colonies, the separate regions supposedly have little to reveal about the nation as a whole, and so are often marginalized in its historiography. Although both Australia, for example, and the Old Northwest were conceived as extensions of the economic interests and the cultural identity of their mother-countries, because Australia became a nation (albeit still part of the British monarchy) and the Old Northwest a region, ideas about one have rarely been applied to the other. Such an approach assumes the assimilation and absorption of the American regions, as opposed to the inevitable difference implicit to Australia’s Commonwealth-based nationalism.

The Old Northwest, then, has been accorded no “colonial” identity in the terms of contemporary scholarship. On account of the purportedly horizontal political arrangement of the country—each region being equal to the others—American colonialism, unlike British, supposedly had no need of the coercive machinations of an Empire that characterized the cultural construction of other settlement colonies. For example, Eric Hinderaker stated that an “American empire of liberty . . . was a radical departure from earlier models of empire. Colonies were by definition second-class territories, constrained by their ambiguous constitutional status and ancillary economic functions.”14 The assumption, of course, is that only British colonization represented an oppressive yoke from which “Americans” had already freed themselves and that the “settlement” of the remainder of the nation was devoid of the coercive rule of a distant metropolis. Such a usable story cannot account for the Old Northwest’s history of confrontation with the East: from the Whiskey Rebellion of the 1790s to the Populist Revolt of the 1890s, Old Northwesterners perceived themselves as underrepresented and misrepresented in the Nation’s economic, political, and cultural definition of itself. The pervasive image of the bucolic heartland at once burdened and cursed Old Northwesterners with the impossible task of representing the national repository of agrarian values and collective naivete. As the “most American of all places,” the region had little say in its own imaginative construction.15
In turn, as Wood attests, as colonials, they too often ignored local virtues and achievements to look East for a more authentic and legitimate national culture. Even today, Easterners consider other regions provincial in contrast to their own metropolitanism. When I moved from Illinois to Connecticut to attend college in 1982, my ignorance of the East was a source of ridicule, while my eastern friends’ provincial ignorance of the Midwest was, if anything, a badge of sophistication. Worse yet, though, many of my fellow Midwesterners in the East sought hard to appear Eastern, to shed the traces of their regional origins. Wood’s observation still holds: Midwesterners view the East as the East views Europe, its own erstwhile colonial parent. Why do Midwesterners feel somehow inferior and less modern than their eastern contemporaries? Why do so many of them view this asymmetry as inevitable and accurate? An examination of the sources of these unbalanced interregional exchanges suggests much about how Americans imagine their multi-regional nation.

This book argues that the primacy of the Northeast and the marginality of other regions in the Nation is the product of the nineteenth-century colonization of its provinces. As early as 1828, however, Old Northwesterners had begun to resist and redirect these sticky misrepresentations. The result was a series of aggressive efforts to localize self-determination and to decentralize the nation’s cultural identity. This book suggests that such efforts represent the beginning of the ongoing quest for “a culture of our own” in resistance to “the colonial spirit” which kept and still at times keeps the region marginal.

In the current period, when the taxonomy of colonial studies has become the subject of intense scholarly attention, its use by generations of Americanists has gone unquestioned. Even Turner suggested that the terminology of colonialism could be used to study American expansion: “In a sense, American history up to our own day has been a colonial history, a history of the colonization of the Great West.” While the annexation, conquest, organizing, and administering of territories west of the original thirteen has been studied both in support of and in opposition to Turner, few have attended to the evolving global aspects of terms like “colonization” and the ramifications for American cultural history introduced by such changes.

Such studies limit themselves to testing the pre-1776 methods of British
colonialism against the post-1776 American colonialism in the Old Northwest. In fact, they are right: it was different. But after 1776, the British themselves had abandoned the colonial policies they had pursued prior to the Revolution. The Revolution taught the British two things: first, the British could not treat their own settlers (and other whites in their colonies) with the same disregard and abuse as they treated their growing number of non-white colonial subjects. Second, white settlers were still needed in conquered places where the local indigenes could or would not cooperate with their conquerors. Settlers were then needed to enrich the imperial capital by using its markets but, the British now knew, would do so only as long as they felt included in both the administration of the colony and the progress of the Empire. 

More precisely, the British responded to the American Revolution by establishing at least two distinct methods of imperial governance. First, the places we think of when we think about imperialism—Africa, India, etc.—were treated as “occupied colonies.” Dating roughly from Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), these former colonies have been at the center of the emerging field of “Postcolonial Theory,” a methodology preoccupied with undoing the damage of imperial occupation, especially its rhetoric of racism and subalternity. Because this form of imperialism was mostly concerned with destroying local cultures and exploiting local resources, it is, at best, indirectly relevant to the study of the Old Northwest. If Americans were directly guilty of this form of empire-building, it was in the overseas territories gained in the Spanish-American War, not in the Old Northwest. Nevertheless, John Carlos Rowe has recently argued that, since new territories acquired in the processes of expansion were represented as foreign entities, discussing the nation as an empire works internally before 1898 as well as externally after 1898. However, Rowe’s argument still exclusively defines colonialism as mostly racial and overlooks its territorial, ethnic, and class-based manifestations.

To study such variations within imperialism, the field of settlement postcolonialism has emerged within postcolonial studies to study the communities and populations in colonies where white colonials stayed and made homes on land seized from a displaced or marginalized aboriginal population, as they did in the Old Northwest. That is, while the British subjugated India and Africa, they were *settling* Australia and the other settlement colonies in ways which reflected a chastened attitude toward the treatment of settlers. According to this new strategy, during the first stage of settlement, indigenous popu-
lations were removed, and not retained as a forced-labor reserve, thus clearing the land for the transplantation of white settlers. Those settlers themselves might be troublesome refugees, actual convicts, or simply surplus populations that Europe’s limited natural resources could not absorb. Most importantly, according to methods of settlement colonialism developed by such British theoreticians as Edward Gibbon Wakefield, David Hume, George Merivale, and Adam Smith, the settling population must somehow be compelled not to do what their erstwhile American colonials had done: imagine themselves a nation. This form of colonialism, therefore, could not be unilaterally hegemonic without alienating the settlers and the assets they occupied and produced. To keep them from rebelling, a number of steps were taken. Among these were: token political inclusion, military protection, and, most importantly, the development of an uncritical identification with a knowable imperial culture.

The last of these, since it exists separate from politics, ultimately makes the Old Northwest relevant to the study of other settlement colonies. Rowe discussed how, well before the Spanish-American War, Americans practiced forms of internal imperialism no less aggressive in nature: “Whether encouraged to assimilate to US culture or racially targeted for exclusion, people and their social behaviors, as much as territory and markets, were focuses of US colonization.” From the 1790s forward, centers of post-Revolutionary American culture and politics along the Atlantic seaboard exported a coherent—and fabricated—sense of stable American identity to the Old Northwest which encouraged settlers to imagine themselves as fulfilling a nationalist teleology and to overlook, first, the pervasive material deprivations of the frontier and, later, political and economic asymmetries. Michael Warner wrote that, “National culture began with a moment of sweeping amnesia about colonialism. Americans learned to think of themselves as living in an immemorial nation, rather than in a colonial interaction of cultures.” Settlers, then, were intended to connect their activity to extending that “immemorial nation,” thereby ignoring the “interaction of cultures” which characterized frontier experience.

The East’s ability to colonize without remembering its own anticolonial birth begins its settlement of the West with an intractable paradox. As I discuss in the chapters that follow, Old Northwesterners were schooled in the fiction that only the East could clearly perceive and administer the process of national expansion. Because British settlement colonies were conceived as extensions of
the mother country, the role of nationalism in the subsequent cultural construction of the settlements must be brought to bear. Empires have long used culture to disguise themselves as nations, to make their subjects peaceful by telling them they are citizens. Any study of imperial practice, then, must address more than policy and administration but also and perhaps even more so, the cultural components of colonization. Such limitations in scholarly practice have led the Old Northwest to be overlooked by both American cultural historians and scholars of international colonialism and imperialism.

On the one side, there is the East’s boastful representation of itself as the Nation—the “universal Yankee nation” as it was labeled at the time. As Mary Grant suggests, “Nineteenth-century northerners rarely missed an opportunity to make sectional capital out of the national past.” This imperialist gesture has been perpetuated by generations of American cultural historians, starting as early as the 1850s. Richard Lyle Power in 1953 specified this effort as “Yankee Cultural Imperialism.” Despite this distinction, recent studies of American colonialism and expansionism trivialize the Old Northwest’s status as cultural colony, neglecting that, as the nineteenth-century progressed, settlement colonialism operated primarily as a self-conscious discursive strategy—a strategy of dominion through misrepresentation. In the Old Northwest, then, within the white population, there is a crucial split between those who conducted this program of regional nationalization and those who resisted it.

On the other side, there was an Old Northwestern population that behaved very much like a group aware of its colonial marginality. More diverse than the East in regard to race, class, and religion, it increasingly challenged external coercion to assimilate into the national whole. In any other place, this might be discussed as an ongoing tussle between an empire and its colonial subjects. In that light, we might apply “postcolonial” theory drawn from other settlement colonies to studies of American regions. In his essay “Including America,” Peter Hulme includes settlement colonies as a distinct branch of postcolonial studies:

If “postcolonial” is a useful word, then it refers to a process of disengagement from the whole colonial syndrome, which takes many forms and probably is for all those whose worlds have been marked by that set of phenomena; “postcolonial” is (or should be) a descriptive, not an evaluative, term. . . . “Postcolonial” therefore should not be used as if it were an adjective describ-
ing a condition that is automatically and for all time assumed once a formal colonial status has been left behind, any more than it should be taken for granted that the change in formal status automatically implies that the psychological, economic, and cultural effects of being a colony can be sloughed off like a snake’s skin.32

Noting that “a country can be both postcolonial and colonizing at the same time,” Hulme forcefully argues for a concept of the postcolonial which represents not a clean break from one state to another, but rather an ongoing “process” by which colonies resist, recognize, internalize, and reinterpret their own entanglement in empires. Moreover, if, by Hulme’s reasoning, the settlement’s formal status as colony is separate from its “sloughing off” of empire, why should colonies not destined for nationhood be excluded in our construction of settlement “postcolonialism”? Commenting on Hulme, Robert Blair St. George notes that “colonialist strategies . . . can persist long after so-called national emergence, shading relations by defining internal colonies within consolidated nation-states.”33 If such internal colonies “disengage the whole colonial syndrome” without engaging their own local nationalism, are they not also “postcolonial”? This book engages local writers who openly pondered the unprecedented paradoxes of local culture in the colonial Old Northwest and the subsequent difficulties in writing about it, difficulties common to writers in other settlement colonies.

Alan Lawson expanded on the notion of “doubleness” in settler writing: settler texts “express their otherness while speaking [the empire’s] words” while establishing “the vantage point from which to look both out and in” (69). Postcolonial settler textuality cannot then be limited to reactionary anticolonialism. While anticolonial resistance serves a function in local self-definition, it is by no means the only element in the exploration of the settlement’s localization. In “Postcolonial Theory and Early America,” Hulme elaborates on how a reading of postcolonialism more fluid than those employed by antipostcolonial Americanists such as Goldman can be most illuminating:

Postcolonial theory has in that sense often been vernacular theory in something like the original sense of that word, seeking to develop a conceptual vocabulary by setting its vernacular resources. Vernacular theory is not necessarily high theory in the usual First World sense... Vernacular theory
will tend to grow closer to the ground, to be more self-reflexive to the extent that it is studying its own genesis, trying to name the processes that brought it into being—that is, though “local,” it is never in any sense “pure” or “autochthonous.” . . . Thus postcolonial work is to a degree reconstitutive; to begin to understand local geographies and histories and to allow them to count in a way previously denied.34

A vernacular theory which allows the reconstitution of local histories and geographies through a study of their engagement with “the whole colonial syndrome” offers immense possibilities for the study of American regions in general and the Old Northwest in particular. To figure out how its cultures and communities “counted” is to recover one more obscured and nearly erased dimension of our history. To reconstitute the vernacular heterogeneity of the Old Northwest—in opposition to the nationalist homogeneity ascribed to it in so much American cultural history—is the mission of An American Colony.

In the Old Northwestern texts studied below, from Hugh Henry Brackenridge’s Incidents of the Insurrection to Hamlin Garland’s Crumbling Idols, there are two consistent themes: the first is that anticolonial ideas like sectionalism and secessionism are unrepresentative of the region’s entanglement in the Nation; second, that the East keeps trying to turn that entanglement into absorption. The region’s growth away from “the whole colonial syndrome” is contingent upon a reconfiguration of the Nation’s East-based self-conception. By asking other regions to measure themselves against an eastern model of sophistication, the East imagines the Nation as a vertically-arranged empire. Without the benefit of geographic separation and with the disadvantage of physical contiguity, the more horizontally arranged multi-regional nation sought by the regionalists would allow the Old Northwest the same distance from imperialist coercion that political decolonization allowed other settlement colonies. The Regionalists studied in this book write as much about redirecting the country away from the aggressive empire it was becoming and toward a more flexible concept of nation as they do about establishing regional culture itself.35 The following chapters trace these interlocked processes. By insisting on being both a part of and distinct from the Nation, Old
Northwestern texts resemble postcolonial settlement texts. From the Northwest Ordinance’s passage in 1787, only seven years passed before the Whiskey Rebellion, the first sign of regional alienation among the white settlers. For the next one hundred years, struggles between the new nation and its even newer colony reveal much about the nation’s transition from country to empire and the Old Northwest’s construction as a colony.

In Part 1, this pattern will be traced from documents such as the Land Ordinance of 1785 and the Northwest Ordinance itself, through advertising such as that of Manasseh Cutler for the Ohio Company, and through the fiction of Gilbert Imlay, James Fenimore Cooper, and William Cullen Bryant. In the midst of this, however, I suggest that the Whiskey Rebellion exposed the various aspects of both Eastern colonialism and regional divergence. While the older parts of the nation experienced a literary renaissance, the Old Northwestern settlements were, in fact, still colonies, and the writings about and from them reflect that problematic relationship with the shifting articulations of nationalist rhetoric articulated in and promulgated by the dominant eastern print culture. These often openly announce themselves as the literary components of a more general project of nation-building and colonialism.

One aspect of that project was the erasure, physical and textual, of indigenous Native populations from the region in the early nineteenth century. In Part 2, I discuss how Native, crossblood, and white settlers all rejected this erasure and, in the process, broke from nationalist and imperialist reckonings of the frontier. One of the most recurring and intransigent problems dogging the study and practice of culture in settlement colonies is the white settler’s relation to the local indigenous community and history and the issue of the settler’s own pronounced lack of indigeneity. Successive chapters engage texts by indigenous writers from the Old Northwest (Black Hawk and George Copway), writers of more complex racial identity (William Warren and John Tanner), and finally, Benjamin Drake’s Life and Adventures of Black Hawk (1838). Each chapter engages complex investigations of the entangled and intercultural relations white and Native communities and goals in the region.

In Part 3, James Hall, Timothy Flint, Daniel Drake, William Gallagher, and William Coggeshall are discussed for their common calls for the development of a distinctly regional culture and identity separate from that generated in the East. These chapters focus on the literary and cultural scene in Cincinnati during the antebellum period and its development of a distinct notion of region-
based cultural, though not political, separatism. I focus on the production of manifestoes of regional self-consciousness and the need to confront eastern misrepresentations since such pronouncements demonstrate the self-consciousness of regional alienation more so than the literary works produced or enabled by these writers. While the Cincinnati writers were by no means proposing a separate nationalist movement, their flirtation with cultural separatism resembles the calls for distinctive local identity in other colonies contemplating their problematic membership within empires.

Part 4 contrasts provincialist/local color writers such as Caroline Kirkland and Edward Eggleston with emerging spokesmen of regional difference such as John Peter Altgeld, E. W. Howe, and Hamlin Garland. Throughout, William Dean Howells—both Westerner and Easterner—serves as one focal point of the growing tensions between regional and national interests—politically as well as culturally—until the 1890s. In the end, as expressed in Garland’s Crumbling Idols, the later regionalists’ calls for local distinctiveness and self-identification moved toward a form of settlement postcolonialism discernible in the terms of Lawson or Hulme. However, as Wood attested in 1935, their efforts stood only at the beginning of the process of decolonizing, of shedding the weakness of “imitativeness.”

This book makes no claims to being comprehensive in nature. My selections have been guided by the authors’ and sources’ deliberate evocation of interregional cultural politics, an intertextual self-consciousness about how their texts contribute to or intervene in ongoing struggles concerning the role of writing in the construction of the region. That brings me to the difficult figure of Mark Twain. Ronald Weber rightly excluded him from his study The Midwestern Ascendancy in American Writing on account of Twain’s more consistent interest in other places: “the sense of place that emerges from Twain’s work is distinctly more Southern and Western than Midwestern. . . . For Twain, the energetic landscape of the Midwest provided only material for reporting. For his greatest imaginative work he turned back upon a very different regional world.” Like many writers more concerned with contributing to national expressions, Twain used the Old Northwest as a template, a norm, a stable source with which to contrast other regions and places, and so he, like Frederick Jackson Turner, nationalized the region within a master narrative of homogeneity. Twain’s aspirations to cosmopolitanism establish him as a writer whose interest in place was increasingly incidental.
Ultimately, this book engages the entanglement of regional and national cultures and finds in it the markers of colonial asymmetries. There was a moment, however, when such a less hierarchical nation might have been developed. In 1803, Thomas Jefferson wrote in a letter to John Breckenridge, a senator from Kentucky: “The future inhabitants of the Atlantic and Mississippi states will be our sons. We leave them in distinct and bordering establishments. We think we see their happiness in union, and we wish it. Events may prove it otherwise; and if they see their interest in separation, why should we take side with our Atlantic rather than our Mississippi descendants?” Such flexible notions of nation, however, were defeated by more aggressive concepts of national unity, and the descendants of the people who defeated it wrote the history books, seconding the effort by coloring American regions as anything but “distinct and bordering.”

Instead, the image of the country’s regions has became rather as alike and as one, as one happy expanded family, with the East as the oldest son, sole heir to the mantle of familial leadership. Since the 1960s, scholars have been exploring the diversity of the nineteenth-century United States by reviving other family members erased from earlier nationalist historiography—wives, daughters, slaves, and servants, as it were. By paying attention to the dispossessed younger children in a system of national primogeniture, An American Colony reconsiders the inheritance of Jefferson’s Mississippi children whose history has too often lurked in shadows of their elder siblings. This book seeks to express a more inclusive representation of the plurality of nineteenth-century American culture by exploring how regions as well contributed to the nation’s diversity, a plurality too often hidden by a view of American culture as surveyed from the Old North Church.