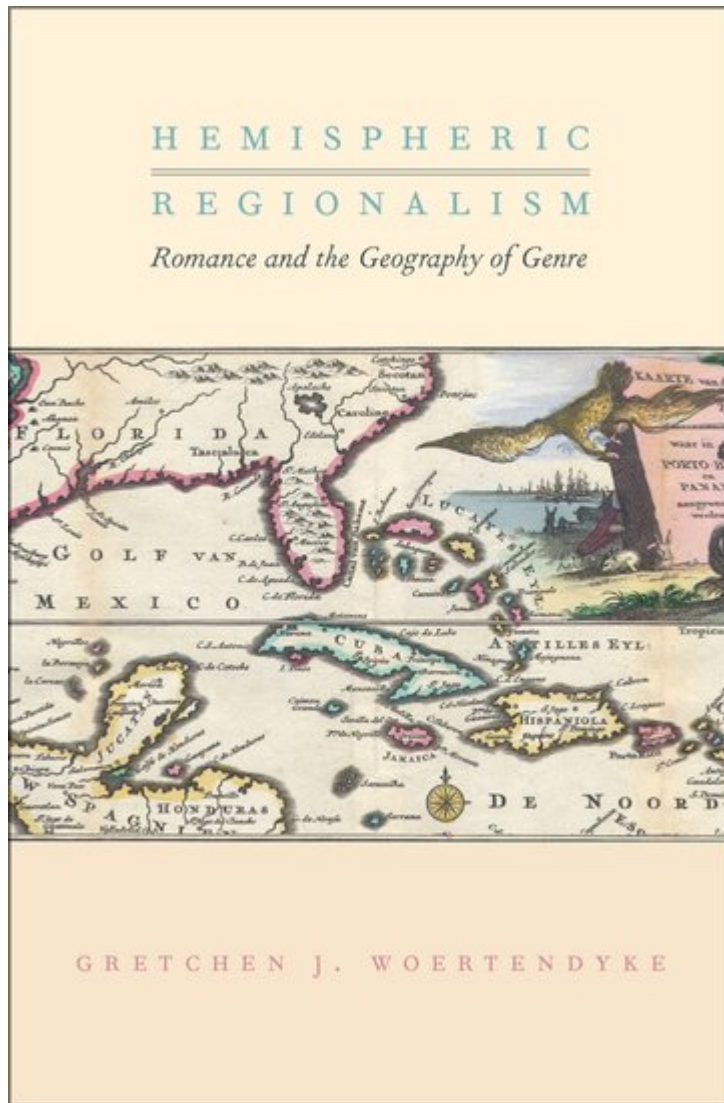
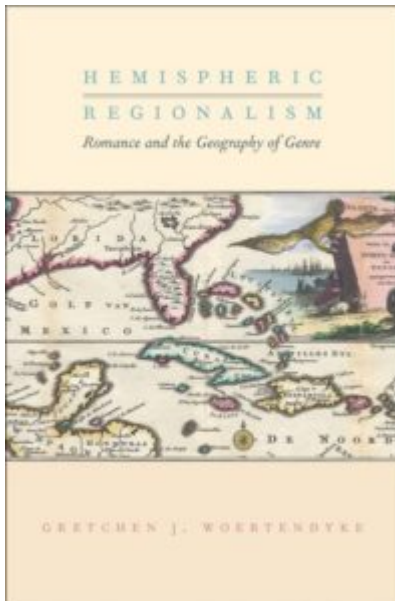


# Conjecturing Histories



What is a hemispheric region? We are accustomed to thinking of regional differences within the national borders of the United States, but how does region emerge if we think about associations across and throughout the American hemisphere? And what might surface if we rethink literary regionalism as a hemispheric cultural and imaginative construct rather than one confined by the national boundaries of the U.S.?



Gretchen J. Woertendyke, *Hemispheric Regionalism: Romance and the Geography of Genre*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. 224 pp., \$74.

In *Hemispheric Regionalism: Romance and the Geography of Genre*, Gretchen J. Woertendyke unsettles and unmoors our geographic conceptions, whether arranged by nation, region, continent, or hemisphere. Through her example, Woertendyke encourages us to re-draw our literary and spacial maps by tracing the networks and movements suggested by a particular archive. For *Hemispheric Regionalism*, Woertendyke has carved a region that extends the nineteenth-century borders of the United States to include Haiti and Cuba, part of the archipelago of islands, colonies, and nations in or along the Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean Sea. This specific though fluid hemispheric region is meant to suggest other re-mappings of the local, national, hemispheric, and transnational, such as we have seen in Matthew Pratt Guterl's *American Mediterranean* (2008) and more recently, in Monique Allewaert's *Ariel's Ecology: Plantations, Personhood, and Colonialism in the American Tropics* (2013), Raul Coronado's *A World Not to Come: A History of Latino Writing and Print Culture* (2013), and Martha Schoolman's *Abolitionist Geographies* (2014).

Ultimately, Woertendyke defines the phrase "hemispheric regionalism" as "multiple scales of geography and history in dynamic relation, rather than a static space" and "an alternative set of relations within the broader categories of nation and hemisphere" (3). Sometimes "hemispheric regionalism" signifies a space we might locate on a map, and sometimes, as Jennifer Greeson has said about the U.S. South, it is "a term of the imagination, a site of national fantasy." We are confronted with an expansive, even fluid sense of "region" as conceptualized by and through literary representation. Throughout her book, Woertendyke engages concerns with aesthetic form and genre theory; with hemispheric, transatlantic, and oceanic literary paradigms; and with the construction of our literary canons.

Nuanced and wide-ranging, Woertendyke's *Hemispheric Regionalism* also shifts critical focus from "novel and nation," a pairing ingrained for scholars of the

early United States at least since Cathy Davidson's seminal *Revolution and the Word* (1988), to "romance and region." Woertendyke directs her readers to longstanding debates about the development of prose fiction in the United States (152), debates that both precede and follow Davidson's work. *Hemispheric Regionalism* alerts us to the ways in which a too singular focus on the novel has distorted U.S. literary history, as well as to the limits of pursuing a nation-centered literary history in lieu of a regional or Atlantic one. Its archive contains titles both familiar and those less so. While gothic, popular, and historical romances are central to her analysis, Woertendyke has also gathered fugitive slave narratives, periodical fiction, advertisements, political documents, and commentary. She mines the editorial work of Maturin M. Ballou. She reads the works of Gabriel Prosser, Nat Turner, and Denmark Vesey, the fiction of John Howison, William Gilmore Simms, and J.H. Ingraham as well as Walter Scott, Charles Brockden Brown, Washington Irving, Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, and James Fenimore Cooper.

As this list suggests, Woertendyke contends with materials that have been understudied or overlooked and juxtaposes them with those more canonical. The result is, in part, an important contribution to scholarly conversations about the genres of the romance and the novel. Woertendyke revisits the commentary of writers like Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry James on the romance as a genre distinct from the novel, while reminding us of the various positions taken by Richard Chase, George Dekker, Ian Duncan, Leslie Fiedler, Northrop Frye, Catherine Gallagher, F.O. Matthiessen, and Ian Watt. In doing so, she substantially expands that conversation, insisting on the distinct contributions of the gothic, the popular, and the historical romance traditions. Fantastical, wildly imaginative, and sometimes improbable, the romance emerges as a versatile kind of "border fiction" in which extra-national regions became crucial in grappling with early national anxieties about shifting local and global alliances and geopolitical instability. Woertendyke follows Charles Brockden Brown in conceiving of the romance as "a speculative genre," and in viewing romance as "an adaptive form of conjectural history" (13). That the capaciousness of the romance genre could and did accommodate revolutionary, reactionary, and assimilationist impulses suggests one explanation for its popularity and its persistence throughout the nineteenth century.

Woertendyke has organized her book in three parts, each with paired chapters: one section on the gothic romance and Haiti; a second on popular romance, Cuba and oceanic spaces; and the final one on historical romance and United States. Temporally, the sections overlap as chapters organized by specific genres and geographies layer within particular decades even as Woertendyke traces material that appears over the course of the long nineteenth century. Woertendyke's organization and methodology thus resemble the sedimentation that Fredric Jameson ascribes to the genre of romance itself, in addressing its particular power to sense other historic rhythms, the ways in which romance reveals the "worldness of the world" (8).

In Part 1, "Specters of Haiti and the Gothic Romance," Woertendyke claims an origin point for the New World gothic romance in the reports and accounts of slave uprising in Saint-Domingue and the ensuing establishment of Haiti, a dynamic that repeats with subsequent accounts of uprisings in the fugitive slave narratives of Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner. In "Fugitive Slave Narratives and Atlantic Conspiracies," Woertendyke elucidates how the spectacular violence of the Haitian Revolution brought latent fears of blackness to the surface, shaping the print archives of the conspiracies of Prosser, Vesey, and Turner, all of which deploy the language of terror and horror. These archives in turn, Woertendyke argues, help establish a link between slavery, blackness, and gothic romance throughout the United States. In the second chapter, "'The Sea is History': Apocalypse and the New World Romance," Woertendyke traces the use of the sea as a metaphor for uncertainty, mobility, and the horrifying unknown by reading John Howison's "The Florida Pirate" (1821) alongside Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), and Melville's *Benito Cereno* (1855), and tying the violence of slavery and revolution to an apocalyptic vision with either no resolution (Poe) or unfathomable annihilation (Melville).

The second part of the book, "The 'Boulevard of the New World' and the Work of Popular Romance," posits Spanish America (or Cuba as a metonym for the continent) as the popular subject of romance, and locates the southern hemisphere both as an object of manifest destiny and as central to the generic development of U.S. romance. The first chapter of this section pairs Washington Irving's biography of Christopher Columbus and Alexandre Olivier Exquemelin's *The Buccaneers of America*. Woertendyke reads Irving and Exquemelin as writing romance-histories that grapple with the specter of Spanish imperial and colonial violence, and the tyranny associated with the Black Legend as they alternately domesticate the figure of Columbus as patriotic, and figure the "pirate" as an object of anxiety and desire. The way Irving and Exquemelin marshal and navigate through vast geographies, collapse and traverse historical time, and negotiate the conventions of romance fiction, romance history and travel accounts makes clear why they would prove such generative precursors for other long-form romances, but also for the periodical fiction Woertendyke examines next.

In the second chapter of this section, "Maturin M. Ballou, Periodical Romance, and the Editor Function," Woertendyke locates the emergence of popular cheap fiction not in the dime novels of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but in the periodical fiction of the 1840s and in the company of other writing that explores the future of U.S.-Cuba relations. Reading news of hemispheric conditions and accounts of the racial, political, and cultural threats posed to the U.S. by its southern neighbors provided what Woertendyke calls "fertile ground" both for the "far-flung fantasies" of romance fiction and for readers to "conjecture about would-be political and social arrangements between the United States and Cuba" (98-99). This chapter offers scholars a list of periodicals and a sampling of the fiction they contain that is also near fertile ground and might potentially provide the basis to revise the

literary history of short fiction.

In the final section, "Historical Romance and the New National Novel," Woertendyke argues that U.S. writers find in the historical romances of Walter Scott a "language and a landscape with which to produce a fundamentally national literature" (122). Moreover, Woertendyke contends that U.S. historical romances she examines "consolidate hemispheric tensions into a coherent national vision" grounded in regionalism (17). Hemispheric spaces like Haiti and Cuba fall away in this section and instead the very geographic expansiveness of the Americas replaces the centuries of time that Scott collapses to great effect. Woertendyke understands the hemispheric energies of the Haitian Revolution in the gothic romance and of imperialist fascination with Cuba in the popular romance to be assimilated in the historical romance as the form becomes the vehicle of literary nationalism.

James Fenimore Cooper, J.H. Ingraham, and William Gilmore Simms followed Scott's model in which regional materials and preoccupations synecdochically fuse the local to the national. In Ingraham and Simms' hands romance becomes a vehicle through which the South could represent the nation's history, present, and future. The translation from the Caribbean to the South, from Scotland to the United States is mediated by turning to Cooper, the "American Scott," and to his sea fiction and its figurations of the pirate. In the alternate literary history Woertendyke lays out, the cowboy eventually supplants the pirate, as western expansion supplants southern expansion.

While remarking on the regionalist fiction of Sarah Orne Jewett and Charles Chesnutt and its investments in New England, the South, and the West, this chapter is provocatively silent on how writers like Catharine Maria Sedgwick, Lydia Maria Child, and Nathaniel Hawthorne may have similarly turned to the historical romance in order to situate New England as the space of the nation's history, present, and future. The chapter is silent too on how Melville ranged over the entirety of the terraqueous earth in *Moby-Dick* and changed locations from the Mississippi to the Hudson, from Wall Street to the Galapagos in search of the imaginative spaces for his various tales. Given the critical attention that these writers and their texts have garnered, and given that the genealogy Woertendyke sketches ends in the aftermath of the Emancipation Proclamation—in a coda titled "Hyperbolic Regionalism, Confederate Nationalism, and the New Southern Frontier"—these silences are ultimately inconsequential to the argumentative arc of *Hemispheric Regionalism*. In effect, Woertendyke's generative theorization of the romance genre's use of time, history, and geography, as well as the interpolations of non-U.S. hemispheric spaces and figures in U.S. romances seems an irresistible invitation to rethink the historical romances that have attained more canonical status in a nationalist U.S. literary history, as well as an incitement to return to the archives with eyes newly opened to the possibilities of other imaginative geographies.

This article originally appeared in issue 17.2.5 (Winter, 2017).

---

Martha Elena Rojas is an associate professor of U.S. literature and culture and the director of the Edmund S. and Nathalie Rumowicz Literature of the Sea seminar and lecture series in the English Department at the University of Rhode Island. She specializes in the early American literature of public documents and in oceanic literary narratives. She is co-editor of *The Sea and Nineteenth-Century Anglophone Literary Culture* (2017).