Critical Regionalism

KLAUS LÖSCH
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Editors

This volume presents analyses of cultural practices and literary/visual representations in the larger field of American Studies that apply a critical regionalist approach. Loosely defined as a set of anti-foundational perspectives in the wake of the spatial turn, critical regionalism seeks to investigate apparent regional specificities against the backdrop of local/global trajectories. Taking their cue from urban studies, the essays in this volume inquire about the region as a category of difference (alongside race, gender, class) and as a possibly subversive point of view from which to critique hegemonic spatial (and capitalist) formations. Topics include an ecocritical analysis of the commodification of bees in the United States (Cheryl Herr), a discussion of multifarious border cultures in the Southwest (Silvia Spitta), an exploration of the role of the regional and the global in the modern women’s movement (Katharina Gerund), a critique of region and class with regard to “redexploitation” in television culture (Tanja Aho) as well as a critical regionalist account of ruin photography in the United States (Miles Orvell), to name but a few contributions to this volume. All of them seek to re-appraise questions of region(ism) focusing on patterns of affiliation, economic structures, political protest, and/or aesthetic practices.

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Critical Regionalism: An Introduction

Klaus Lösch and Heike Paul

I.

Regionalism has always been premised on both, particularization and generalization. In the United States, it suggests geographical and cultural differences among distinct parts of the country as, in sum, part(s) of the nation; regions add up to the nation as a whole. But what may count as a region and in which discourse? Some regions have always been crucial for American studies; they were at the center of early Americanist scholarship and thus foundational for the development of American studies and its “field imaginary” (Pease 10), i.e. for the scholarship that addressed the United States in its unity (and to a lesser degree in its diversity) and that made it the object of a new discipline. Henry Nash Smith’s book on the American West (Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth, 1950) is perhaps the single most important work in this context since it also demonstrates how the notion of regions (in this case: the West) is considered as symbolically meaningful for the nation as a whole. This region and its history are seen as representative of the nation and its becoming, a pars pro toto, so to speak, in conjunction with notions of a manifest destiny which are being transposed into a kind of geographical determinism. The local specificity of a region is not explicitly addressed by Nash Smith and other scholars of his cohort, and ‘region’ is therefore not being used as (literal) signifier of the local but rather in an allegorical way. By inversion and in contrast to the discourse(s) on the West, the South has often figured as that which the nation is not: a supposedly national place or region representative of the whole. The South as region has often been projected as the ‘other’ America. In their respective variations, regional fictions of the West and the South (with, of course, some overlap between them) have for a long time dominated Americanist scholarship; both also competed, if you will, in establishing a privileged perspective on the United States along an East/West or a North/South axis. The West, in particular, has been repeatedly conceptualized as a kind of region that is more of a space of transition and of nation-building than an actual place (in the sense of belonging and rootedness) with scholars not even agreeing on ‘where’ exactly it is located. More recent scholarship in the field of new western history (works such as Patricia Nelson Limerick’s The Legacy of Conquest, Clyde Milner’s new history of the West, and Neil Campbell’s The Rhizomatic West) has drawn upon this observation and has used it to engender a more self-reflexive approach – an approach that has also helped to think about regions anew – and more critically. These works are part of a genealogy of critical regionalism.
Within literary studies, a closer look at regions and regionalisms (in contradistinction to their allegorization and as an attempt at defining regional identities) has been at the center of the writings of the various regional movements (such as the Southern Agrarians). So-called local color fiction and regionalist literature are the object of regionalist scholarship; the latter turns against all forms of an allegorical reading of regions and affirms the historical, cultural, and political specificity of regional landscapes and locales. To give but one example: Charles Reagan Wilson, a representative scholar of regionalism, has focused on the “regional consciousness” in his work (mostly on the South). Not only do regionalists in literary (and in cultural) studies make claims about regional specificity, they may even claim this specificity in opposition (in the framework of a counter-discourse, so to speak) to the national rather than seeing it as/or at its core. Robert Dorman’s *Revolt from the Provinces* has chronicled this ‘other’ kind of regionalism that not only affirms and highlights local and regional cultural and political distinctions but also relates the region to the nation in quite an antagonistic manner. In extending this kind of critique that may be seen as anti-modern and/or anti-capitalist critique, region has often become associated somewhat imprecisely with a kind of “ruralized regionalism” where the region is considered as the locus of origin that guarantees authentic practices of an unalienated life in reaction to anxieties induced by modernization and globalization. Regionalism, in this classical partial understanding, has been viewed as championing a “pastoral ideal,” i.e. an ethically superior way of life which we may want to protect or should return to. Of course, this vision is quite exclusive in a literal sense: “Never met a stranger” is a phrase Mary E. Grey uses as a starting point for identifying and interrogating queer absences and presences in rural America – and the list of the excluded could go on. In that sense, region and regional identity are positioned as categories of difference and markers of identity alongside race, gender, sexuality, and class and intersect with them; region is thus seen as a highly relevant difference that needs to be addressed, represented, and recognized by others. In such contexts, positive thoughts on the region may appear to be nostalgically tinged.¹

In a constructivist paradigm, the region is no less an “imagined community” (Anderson) than the nation, and any essentialist understanding of it as a defining factor in individual and collective identity formation must be analyzed as an expression of people’s longing for a localized version of ontological security, i.e. for a home and a homeland at hand, so to speak. Against this background, regional difference cannot simply be considered marginal and be absorbed in an overarching national identity. Recent debates in the context of globalization have also called into question the adequacy of a center-periphery model on various levels including that between city and country, between urban centers and rural

¹ With regard to the relation between the regional and the rural, see the introduction in Kley and Paul 2015.
regions. In American studies scholarship we may think of Leo Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964, 2000) as an early case in point and Marx’s later modification of the initial argument in order to account for more ambivalent representations of regions and their political implications. It is Marx’s notion of an older pastoralism revisited that provides a critical intervention into discourses of the region and the nation that are structured along binary oppositions.²

II.

_Critical regionalism_ connects the dominant ways of analyzing the region in the field of American studies and does the work of revisioning those approaches against the backdrop of globalization. Thus, critical regionalism draws upon the national, the subnational, and the transnational dimension in the study of regions and prompts a series of questions: How to define a region? Turning away from the allegorical mode, can we conceive of it as territorial in the literal sense at all? Many contributors to this volume do not. And even if so, does it exist _only_ as a territory in the sense of a spatial entity? Such a semantics of region would sit uneasily with a contemporary concept of culture that has been quite radically deterritorialized. What, then, is the relationship of region and culture? On a local-global continuum, is the region closer to the local or to the global? Or does it keep the middle ground to mediate between both? Does it entail a particular set of spatial practices? These are some of the questions the essays in this volume address.

_Critical regionalism_ is not a new paradigm; rather, it is a set of fresh approaches in various disciplines, some of them part of an interdisciplinary American studies framework and of area studies scholarship in general. It investigates the construction of regions and their inter-relation which may be evoking analogies, convergences, or antagonisms. Moving beyond essentialist modes of conceptualizing, describing, and scrutinizing regional identities (both as self-representations and as representations by others), critical regionalism follows a comparative perspective that pays attention to cultural specificity on the one hand and to processes of cultural exchange and transfer on the other, i.e. it tries to elucidate the hidden connections between the local/regional and the global which are mostly being glossed over in self-conscious constructions of regional identities. In privileging an approach to regions that highlights the constitutive dialectic of the local and the global, it emphasizes questions of power and authority. Thus, regions

² In a similar vein, publications such as _Regionalists on the Left_ attest to the fact that a regionally tinged political agenda need not necessarily be nostalgic, back-ward looking, and conservative.
have to be conceptualized not as autonomous entities but as part of intricate global structures implying interdependencies of all kinds.

The agenda of critical regionalism may be viewed as one particular trajectory of more recent revisionist regionalist scholarship in general. The term itself has entered cultural studies debates via contemporary architectural criticism (after critical regionalism was coined by Alexander Tzonis and Lianne Lefaivre in 1981) and has been programmatically used by Kenneth Frampton in his manifesto Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance (1983). Frampton argues for a new placeboundedness in the architecture of late capitalism and – drawing on Paul Ricoeur – against a universalization that is seen as destructive (16). He identifies “the freestanding high-rise and the serpentine freeway” as the “two symbiotic instruments of Megalopolitan development” (17) that share a global ubiquity. Sharply criticizing a normative utilitarianism (“utility established as meaning generates meaninglessness,” ibid.), Frampton calls for the re-attachment of architectural design to particular local, regional, and cultural elements, not in a seemingly innocent nostalgic but in a self-reflexive way: “It may find its governing inspiration in such things as the range and quality of the local light, or in a tectonic derived from a peculiar structural mode, or in the topography of a given site” (21).

Of course, critical regionalism in its wider sense is not only interested in cultural factors and their symbolic effects but also in forms of political participation and in economic aspects of the local “linking cultural and socioeconomic localized identities, especially as these stand in antagonistic, if also negotiated, relationships with late capitalist globalization” (Limón 167). Thus, critical regionalism may be seen as a discourse that articulates a topical cultural critique which tries to resist late capitalism as a hegemonic (i.e. naturalized) order. In this perspective, a late capitalist logic fabricates regions along the lines of a “corporate geography” that only allows for a kind of regional difference that can be used in commercials for commercial interests, as Cheryl Herr points out (3). In this vein, regions themselves become commodities being circulated in global processes of production and consumption. In contradistinction, critical regionalism explores alternative regionalisms that may offer different (diasporic) configurations of regions and regional structures and that may produce different genealogical accounts of how regions ‘become’ regions in the first place.

These accounts invariably touch upon the construction of region on the one hand and the aims of regional studies on the other focusing on that which the region etymologically has at its root: rule and power. In American studies, this may have us envision a broad trajectory that returns us to Turner’s geographical determinism echoing 19th century evolutionary theory, then has us look at the ways in which the geopolitical constellation of the cold war translates colonialist semantics into a new framework for area studies in which regions simultaneously do and do not ‘exist’, to, finally, more recent studies that enforce a sense of an economic determinism which pertains to regions at various levels. In a diachronic
perspective it thus becomes obvious that the semantics of regions are quite contingent, and one may even see region as an empty signifier that is made to signify various hierarchies in historically specific discourses. Therefore, it is necessary to painstakingly contextualize the term and to try to analyze the overt and the covert agendas underlying its usage. This caveat is especially pertinent when we study evaluative collocations such as ‘the wild West’ or ‘the dirty South,’ to give but two examples. And, last but not least, in dealing with aesthetic discourses that claim (or deny) a specific regional register, it is important to dig into their respective agendas and focus on the power dynamics they (a) represent and (b) engage in.

Frampton’s manifesto has found echoes in various disciplines. In his own it has been either highly acclaimed or severely criticized. In a recent critique, Keith Eggener posits that Frampton’s program has “marginalized and conflated the diverse architectural tendencies it has championed” (Eggener 229) and that his critical regionalism has produced a new hegemonic architectural order that again involves othering, but of a different kind. Notwithstanding this criticism, Frampton’s theses have strongly resonated in the humanities, among them American studies. Wendy Katz and Timothy Mahoney’s Regionalism and the Humanities addresses regionalism after the spatial turn in literary and cultural studies; the contributors to their volume highlight revisionist regionalism (as in the works of the New Western historians) as well as ‘new regionalisms’ (see Wilson). In an attempt to refresh regionalist studies, Douglas Reichert Powell defines region as “a loosely and variously defined zone that cuts across the boundaries of the academic landscape” (Reichert Powell 6) and thus emphasizes interdisciplinarity. In a cultural studies framework Cheryl Herr (also a contributor to this book) has been the first to apply the term critical regionalism for cultural and literary analyses, and, in a similar context, Heike Paul has argued for a critical regionalist perspective as a quintessential post-exceptionalist American studies framework (Paul).

The present volume is to be situated within the context of these recent interventions. One of its core tenets is that critical regionalism is a current, productive, and highly relevant approach in cultural studies-scholarship, and the essays in this volume attest to this.

III.

The contributions to this collection apply a perspective informed by critical regionalism to cultural, historical, political, social, and literary analyses. They address various geographical regions, specific figurations of place and region as well as a series of transregional (and transnational) trajectories; they deal with distinct groups within American society and their cultural productions in terms of
(region-based or region-related) minority discourses, and representations of the effects of an exploitative approach to the making and unmaking of regions.

**Cheryl Temple Herr** sees critical regionalist scholarship addressing instances of crises. It is the “bees in crisis” and the contemporary practices of “migratory beekeeping” in the United States that are at the center of her article. She analyzes the larger implications of the cross-country trucking of bee hives for scheduled pollinations in various regions of the country and argues that these practices reveal the thorough commodification of bees and the destruction of their habitat as an effect of global markets that rely on bee pollination for profit. Herr draws on a critical regionalist and ecocritical perspective in order to address these grievances and to reflect more broadly on “the circumstances behind the [hegemonic] administration of space” for animals and humans alike. In his essay “Ruins, Places, and Photography: Towards a Cultural Aesthetics of Catastrophe,” **Miles Orvell** offers a typology of ruin that encompasses ruins as part of a temporal cycle, as the result of a singular, catastrophic event, and as part of an apocalyptic narrative/vision. Orvell revisits an archive of 150 years of ruin photography and time and again points to the role of photography as documentation of ruin landscapes, to its aesthetic transformations, and its uses as a medium of political intervention. **Claudia Sadowski-Smith** sees border regions in their local as well as transnational quality as an exemplum for critical regionalism. It is the indigenous peoples of North America (whose land is often cut across by the borders of current nation states), whom she sees at the forefront of a critical regionalism that intervenes in hegemonic spatialities and insists on regional sovereignty: border crossing, in her argumentation, is part and parcel of a critical regionalist practice. **Silvia Spitta** also zooms in on the border, promoting “trans-border studies” as a critical regionalist paradigm; she addresses recent performance work and art productions of and on the US-Mexico borderlands by the architect Teddy Cruz, the writers Eduardo Antonio Parra and Humberto Félix Berumen and the artist Heriberto Yépez. All of them, she suggests, take a critical angle toward hegemonic discourses of ‘border control.’ Picking up from there, **Carmen Brosig’s** essay extends the transnational scope further. In her discussion of the region of Aztlan, the mythical homeland of Mexican-Americans evoked by the Chicano movement, she identifies constructions of transnational solidarity in the wake of protests against the war in Vietnam by Mexican Americans in the United States. The nexus of Chicano cultural nationalism and anti-Vietnam-War protests, established in a move of anticolonial cross-mapping is to be found in Chicano literature, poster art, and other forms of political commitment that are suggestive of transregional and transnational connections between two forms of colonial oppression. **Birgit Bauridl** uses a critical regionalist paradigm in order to identify and reflect on the symbolic construction of “Graf,” a US military training area in Southern Germany. In her exploration of the multiple meanings of that site and the various, at times competing cultural and spatial practices that ‘produce’ it, she views it as a prism of larger diachronic and synchronic processes of cultural mobility and transfer and as
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a regional turntable of transnational and transcultural processes with wide-ranging impact. In her article “Sisterhood Is Regional?: US-American Women’s Activism between the Global and the Local,” Katharina Gerund investigates the role and function of the region and of regionalism for the activism of second wave feminists. Taking Betty Friedan’s “suburban feminism” and Robin Morgan’s declared “global feminism” as two manifestations of the feminist spectrum ranging from place-bound particularity of feminist organization on the one hand to unbound universalism on the other, Gerund suggests that critical regionalism offers a fresh perspective on spatial feminist genealogies and the ways in which these are attached to local, regional, and global agendas and claims. In line with recent regionalist and feminist scholarship, Amy Doherty Mohr discusses Willa Cather’s work in the context of critical regionalism and looks more closely at the crossmapping, of domestic affiliations with international contexts. As Mohr points out, Cather’s novels, particularly One of Ours, present an ironic revisiting of the domestic space at home and abroad (in Europe) in time of war and, in doing so, ironizes (and mobilizes) notions of masculinity and of patriotism. A very different literary reading is at the center of Rachael Price’s piece on Larry McMurtry’s The Last Picture Show and its poignant anti-pastoralism. The novel shows the situation of a Texas oil town in rapid decline, which is reflected in all of the dysfunctional personal and intimate relationships the novel portrays. Conspicuously counter-playing desert and garden imagery as the two dominant tropes of the (South)West, both are ultimately shown as insufficient for characterizing the state of the rural Southwestern town in a late capitalist scenario that puts it at the mercy of global forces seemingly located elsewhere. Finally, Tanja Aho discusses the reality television series Here Comes Honey Boo Boo (aired on TLC, 2012-2014) against hegemonic cultural practices of “rednexploitation” by taking recourse to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s concepts of paranoid and reparative reading and applying them to different representations of Southernness in popular culture. Drawing on a ‘low theory’ of television, Aho disentangles bottom-up, viewer responses from an overall mis-recognition of the series and its region- and class-specific cultural work.

This volume brings together selected key-note presentations and student papers from the Bavarian American Academy’s Summer Schools of 2013, 2014, and 2015. The Bavarian American Academy with its regional institutional setting in Germany and its commitment to transatlantic dialogue and exchange may be itself an ideal site from which to articulate a critical regionalist perspective. Its Summer School program, bringing together renowned faculty and doctoral students from the United States and Europe since 2006, has evolved around key issues in American studies to be fruitfully considered in a transatlantic framework. “Critical Regionalism” has been the overall theme of 2013 and 2014 with a bit of a reprise in 2015. This volume captures some of the trajectories of our discussions. The editors would like to thank the participants for engaging with this topic under the
arc of the BAA and for contributing their work to the present volume. Thanks also go to Jasmin Falk at the BAA for her diligent editorial work.

Works Cited:


Critical Regionalism and Cultural Studies: Bees in Crisis

Cheryl Temple Herr

Critical Regionalists

Critical regionalism as an architectural practice and cultural discourse has several points of origin. In most discussions of critical regionalism, Alexander Tzonis, Kenneth Frampton, and Fredric Jameson have prominence. More recent texts by Mary Hufford, Douglas Reichert Powell, Michael Trujillo, and José Limón have continued to extend this approach to the study of culture. By and large, each of these individuals has written in a critical regionalist mode in order to address a moment of crisis. We can make the claim, then, that perceived cultural crisis drives critical regionalism in its primary formulations and, as it happens, for its precursors.

One such precursor was Lewis Mumford. His multidisciplinary writings from the 1920s through the 70s worried about the future of community, the expansionist ideology of modernity, warfare in the 20th century, and the designed obsolescence that characterizes what he called megatechnics. Throughout the literature of architectural critical regionalism, people return to Mumford’s work for inspiration. For practical purposes, however, it was the invitation received in 1978 by architect Alexander Tzonis to write an essay on the work of young German architects that jump-started the architectural movement called critical regionalism. Tzonis turned to Mumford’s regionalist critique of the International Style to begin his investigation into these German architects and “eine andere Architektur” (Lefaivre and Tzonis 6). Tzonis has stated, “[t]he task of critical regionalism is to rethink architecture through the concept of region. Whether this involves complex human ties or the balance of the ecosystem, it is opposed to mindlessly adopting narcissistic dogmas that undermine community, economy, and the environment” (Lefaivre and Tzonis 20).

During the early 1990s, I wrote a book about Ireland and the American (US) Midwest called Critical Regionalism and Cultural Studies. At the time, under the sign of the Single European Act, I tried to develop a critical regionalist model for cultural studies, adapting architectural theory to encounter literary, historical, and visual texts, to think through the global agricultural crisis that had begun in the 1980s. I wanted to widen the purview of critical regionalism to cover artifacts beyond but also including the built environment. Thinking back and forth across the Atlantic, across somewhat symmetrical terrains, proved to be a productive way to think about family farming in the era of agribusiness. Turning back to critical regionalism’s dialectic of diversity and globalization, I looked at filiated rural
regions’ production of narratives that essentially filled in the blanks in each other’s stories. What emerged was a complex inter-zone that gestured beyond the structures of administered society. Artists, it seemed, and many of them architects, had prepared the terrain for a critical cross-regionalism eager for material change and sustainable agricultures.

**The Problem: Bees in Crisis**

For the purposes of this paper, the crisis is one that we are all familiar with – the phenomenon of bee colony collapse. In this case, a critical regionalist approach should carry us into the history and representation of regional social forces behind this worldwide problem and perhaps offer useful insights about the way forward.

A helpful starting point is the fact that at the end of April 2013, fifteen of the EU member states approved a restriction on neonicotinoid pesticides. Spurred on by European initiatives, American beekeepers are now lobbying Congress to take action against these invasive and systemic pesticides. The Cummings Report, issued periodically on Project Apis to cover the condition of bees in the California almond orchards, stated in mid April that this year’s “pollination force” was “relatively poor.” Pollination prices rose to $200 per hive as it became obvious that the “near perfect almond bloom” would be under-pollinated. As anticipated, hives were quite susceptible to viruses and mites, and many brood boxes lost up to half of the colony while waiting to pollinate the almond crop. Altogether, honey bee pollination in California’s early spring was spotty (Cummings). In this paper, I undertake a quick glance at two or three regions within the United States in terms of their bee history and current beekeeping practices.

First and foremost, it is not the case that apiculture was at one time pristinely productive and has suddenly become problematic. The history of the bee in America is much more complicated than this. For instance, there have always been bee pathogens. American beekeepers have long had to watch for problems like foulbrood and wax moths. It is the current combination of pathogens, pesticides, and other stressors that have caused unprecedented problems in cultivating honey bees (Jacobsen 139). Beyond the assault of neonic, honey bees have suffered from continuing loss of meadowlands and floral diversity. Over the years bee colonies have sometimes dwindled or simply absconded, but starting in 2006 the number of colonies that abruptly disappeared in the United States (also in various parts of Europe) has been substantial, widespread, and seemingly unmistakable.

Further and to a degree that feels distinctively American, bees have become super-stressed by the now-routine practices of extensive migratory beekeeping. Consider the annual itinerary of a large-scale beekeeper. In *The Beekeeper’s Lament*, Hannah Nordhaus provides the template of John Miller’s annual bee runs (Nordhaus 18-22).
January 19: feed 2,700 hives in Newcastle, CA
January 20: ship 7,000 hives from Idaho to California
January 26-February 10: place hives in California almond orchards
March 9-13: collect hives. Feed bees. Ship 3,000 hives to Newcastle, 3,000 hives to Washington State apple orchards, and 1,600 hives to Stockton, CA cherry orchards
End of April: re-collect hives, divide hives, and re-queen them
May: truck hives to North Dakota
Harvest honey in September
Store bees for winter in special cellars in Idaho

My own discussions with midwestern beekeepers confirm that this strenuous agenda is relatively routine for the industry.

Many problems unfurl from the practice of trucking bees. For instance, in *Fruitless Fall*, Rowan Jacobsen notes,

[i]t’s not in a beehive’s nature to be at full strength in February. The European honey bee would normally spend December and January in semi-hibernation. To have a full, eight-frame hive of bees by the beginning of February, beekeepers need to trick their bees into believing that spring has come in December and that food is abundant. They need to park the bees somewhere relatively warm for November, December, and January, and feed, feed, feed. Only then will the queen start laying so that a phalanx of foragers will be ready for the February almonds. (127)

Nonetheless, the practice of parking bees is widespread enough to have a name: “feedlot beekeeping” (Jacobsen 127). Despite the cost in bees, all of the experts agree with Nordhaus that “[t]his annual bee migration […] [is] the glue that holds much of our [America’s] agricultural system together” (Nordhaus 22).

A map posted on the internet by the Beekeepers Association in Person County, North Carolina shows three typical commercial routes in the complex and, given the peak oil situation, increasingly expensive solution to American agriculture’s lust for bees (<http://www.personcountybeekeepers.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/Pollination21.jpg>). One route runs from California’s sunflowers, apples, cherries, almonds, melons, avocados, cucumbers, and kiwis north to Washington State’s apples, cherries, cranberries, pears, and plums. From the Pacific Northwest, the same bee colonies circle to the midwestern crops of sunflowers, cucumbers, and cherries before the cycle begins again. A second route connects Florida with the Midwest, the Midwest with Maine’s blueberry harvest, and returns the busy pollinators from New England to Florida. Yet a third route connects the South with the Northeastern states in an endless circle of fructification. These routes are not the only ones possible, but they impressively map American agriculture as a site of restless industrial churning. And how does
being trucked around feel to the subjects themselves? Search the internet for “trucking bee hives,” and YouTube brings up numerous videos taken on American highways showing massive numbers of bees being whipped against the netting holding their colonies on the truck.

**Bees in America**

How did we arrive at this constellation of beekeeping practices in the United States? What were the historical pressures and cultural circumstances that have made honey bees the medium – a peculiarly architectural medium – through which rural regional desires in the United States are currently met? Certainly, there is little or nothing in what we might call the bee’s nature that leads to migratory beekeeping. To the contrary, bees are often celebrated for their ability to become one with their immediate stable environment. In a strikingly original book called *Insect Media*, Finnish theorist Jussi Parikka explains that he is investigating distributed intelligence among insects as a “milieu approach to the world” (Parikka xxvi). Parikka draws on nineteenth- and twentieth-century understandings of ‘instinct’ to underwrite his attention to bee behavior and environment. From Henri Bergson he takes the view that instinct is “not merely […] an automated response [that] a primitive animal (such as an insect) gives to a stimulus but in addition involves ‘discernment and attunement’ to the animal’s environment” (Parikka 20). From William James, Parikka draws the proposal “that instincts are not abstract schemes an animal might have but instead ‘functional correlatives of a structure.’” And Parikka extends these definitions to regard insect instincts as “prelinguistic modes of intertwining the body with its surroundings” in a mise-en-scène in which all is motion and potentiality rather than reductive response (Parikka 23). Thus in order to achieve its rich possibilities, the instinctual capacity of a bee colony will “intimately” conform to the materiality of the immediate setting (Parikka 30). The cascade of minute adjustments implied in this formulation resonates with Tzonis’ views on the architectural ecology of critical regionalism. According to this mode of understanding, bees organize material environments into habitat while not really distinguishing between their own individual embodiment and that of the collective (Parikka 33). As a ‘superorganism,’ the bee colony is woven into its surroundings in a way that human beings obviously have trouble imagining but that is also within the trajectory of critical regionalist desire. Left to their own devices, bees would probably stay put, only gradually spinning off new hives. And it is precisely a lack of cross-species imagination that enables bee farmers to wrest bee boxes (already one remove from nature) from meadows and propel them at high speeds across American highways.

A robust corollary to this point is that honey bees as we know them are not even native to the North American continent. Tammy Horn explains, “[e]ven though honey bees […] were not native to North America, as soon as colonists
imagined that America could be ‘a land of milk and honey,’ they set in motion the events to make America so” (5). In the decades of European settlement that preceded the sugar economy’s impact on America, bees and their keepers arrived from Sweden, England, the Netherlands, France, and Germany. Historical records locate the earliest American bees, a dark variety then known as German bees, in 1620. On the 47 million acres that William Penn purchased from Charles II, one could find a wide array of “proficient” German Protestant beekeepers (Horn 29). Many records note native Indians’ complaints about “the white man’s flies,” the arrival of which on Indian land always preceded land takeovers (Horn 27-28). At the same time, Native Americans soon learned to appreciate honey as a supplement to their traditional maple syrup.

Along with the German bees out there on the westward-moving frontier were honey hunters. “Forests in Sweden, England, and Germany were tightly controlled by the state, but colonists were free to find bee trees in America” (Horn 30). After meeting their own modest needs for sweetening, these transplanted honey hunters soon sold their newly claimed product on a fairly large-scale commercial basis to town-dwellers. Horn notes, “[f]rom Texas to Iowa” the bee hunter “became a type […] the man pushing the boundaries of the frontier, one foot in the wild, one foot in civilization” (73).

James Fenimore Cooper

One of America’s earliest popular writers of historical romances, James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851), was well aware of the honey hunter character type. Cooper’s 1848 fiction *Oak Openings* represents the frontier in 1812, nine years after the Louisiana Purchase. Most of Cooper’s fame comes from his Leatherstocking tales, including *The Last of the Mohicans*. So it is that very little criticism has been written on *Oak Openings*, but Scott Michaelsen’s 1999 volume *The Limits of Multiculturalism: Interrogating the Origins of American Anthropology* offers a compelling interpretation; in this narrative Cooper subtly criticizes the racism of both 1812 and 1848:

The most remarkable feature of the novel is the constant, recurrent ethnological (that is, comparative) focus across specifically cultural lines that few anthropologists ever – and no other contemporaneous ones – permit themselves to cross: that is, the border between First and Third World, between Anglo and Amerindian. (Michaelsen 125)

Michaelsen compares Cooper’s *Oak Openings* to Francis Parkman’s *The History of the Conspiracy of Pontiac* (1851) because both works deal with “the rise of pan-Indian resistance on the white frontier” (125). I want to reinforce this claim by attending to Cooper’s repeated efforts to describe the biome – the specific region –
that supplies both setting and theme and that, in relation to the historical challenges of 1813, accounts for the action.

Cooper is fascinated by the landscape named in the title to his novel, a 300 square mile region that extends into both Ohio and Michigan. This zone features oak woodlands and prairie wetlands that before European settlement were surrounded by the Great Black Swamp. Coming from the densely wooded swamp into clearings dotted with oaks, early wagon trains could move easily through this park-like landscape. For many years, European settlers assumed that the oak openings were natural formations. The prevalent belief was that the natives who had lived in this area had not altered the so-called wilderness in any way. As we know, during the 1950s and even later, ecologists tended to imagine ‘wilderness’ as something pristine, entirely natural, and unaffected by Native American inhabitants. However, in 1954, ethnographer Omer Stewart published work that documented the systematic burning of various American landscapes by indigenous hunter-gatherers. Fire allowed these inhabitants to shape regional landscapes to their needs. Stewart claimed,

[t]he irony is that some of these ‘virgin’ ecosystems evolved with the presence and influence of Indians over thousands of years. The [...] oak forest margins in the Great Lakes region that [H. C.] Cowles included in his designation of ‘mature, climax’ forest were in fact an expanded artifact of former Ojibwa burning practices. (38)

The fact is that many locations had long been actively managed by native tribes. The wilderness was not the easy Eden, the “steady state system,” so often assumed. What seemed to incoming Europeans to be the “balance of nature” had been constructed to feature “maximum species diversity and biomass production” (Stewart 38). Perhaps needless to say, “[t]he forces that degrade and rejuvenate ecosystems, such as insects, floods, fires, diseases, tree windfalls, and detritus accumulation, were frequently not factored into this previously held idyllic image” (9; see also Williams). Indeed, the genial face that the oak openings presented to Europeans had been carefully constructed before they arrived.

Stewart makes the case that the regular (one to three year) intentional burns (identified after the fact by fire scars in tree rings and fossil evidence) were the principal forces constructing the so-called wilderness that Cooper depicts in Oak Openings. These burns diversified the midwestern habitat and determined what types of vegetation flourished, how animal life was managed, and how much of America was constructed as prairie. The oak savannas in question were not fixed features but biological zones that Native Americans had long managed to their own ends. The clearings that provide the setting for Cooper’s novel of 1812 had already been controlled by indigenous tribes in order to optimize hunting and foraging, to minimize pests, to enable travel and warfare, and to encourage waterfowl and other species to populate the area. Stewart argued that what looked to early settlers like