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How New? What Place?:
Southern Studies and the Rest of the World

Suzanne W. Jones and Sharon Monteith, eds., *South to a New Place: Region, Literature, Culture*. Southern Literary Studies ser. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002. xxiii + 394 pp. \$85.00; \$34.95 paper.

Scholars of American literature—indeed of any national literature—be advised: though study of southern literature and culture may be increasingly ghettoized in academe,¹ recent work in this field provides a crucial model for reconceptualizing traditional notions of nation, region, and the role of place in a “globalized” America whose borders seem suddenly (really always have been) permeable, transnational, and in flux. Breaking away from a narrow association of regionalism with sectionalism, of place with stasis and the “autochthonous ideal,” and (more or less) eager to apply the insights of postcolonial theory to its always contested, multicultural, inherently decentered subject, southern studies in the new millennium has seen a flowering of critical reconfigurings, including Robert Brinkmeyer’s *Remapping Southern Literature* (2000), Helen Taylor’s *Circling Dixie* (2001), Tara McPherson’s *Reconstructing Dixie* (2003), and the forthcoming *Look*

1. Voicing the experience of many southern literature scholars, Patricia Yaeger points to the ghettoizing of southern studies in *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women’s Writing, 1930–1990* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000) 250–52. In a job interview, this reviewer was asked, “Are you an Americanist who does southern, or a southernist who does American?” asserting an unbridgeable difference and implying that if I wanted a job teaching postmodern American literature, I’d best be the former.

Away! The U.S. South in New World Studies, edited by Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn. Building from this work, *South to a New Place: Region, Literature, Culture*, edited by Suzanne W. Jones and Sharon Monteith, marks a transitional moment in southern studies, where modernist notions of “imagined community” and more recent post-colonial reconfigurations of margin and center appear side by side, often in uneasy tension. The challenges inherent in such a moment are well-represented here, if not always met: fuller exploration awaits. Nevertheless, the collection as a whole provides an invaluable introduction to questions that should engage anyone interested in the way places—nations, regions, subcultures—form and reform in a postmodern context.

Despite some (mainly white) southerners’ attempts to portray and enact a closed society, the American South has always been a dynamic site of hybrid, often competing cultures and identities, “a point of condensation,” Tara McPherson has recently argued, “for various regional and national narratives of place, race, and gender.”² Southern literature has long embodied, if not acknowledged, this hybridity. Albert Murray made it the central focus of his blues-structured memoir, *South to a Very Old Place* (1971), where he riffs upon the degree of “old crossroad-store plus courthouse-square sensibility” that black and white “down-home” southerners share, even if they live outside the geographical South. The editors of *South to a New Place* in turn riff upon Murray’s creative remappings to assert new (old) connections between place, culture, and literature “within a postmodern, diverse, inclusive, and international context” (9). “Wide-ranging” is the most often used adjective in the editors’ introduction, and it accurately describes the selection of essays here on topics from “Native American Literature, Ecocriticism, and the South” to “Constructing Region in Southern and East German Literature.” Canon favorites such as Faulkner, *Gone with the Wind*, and the Nashville Agrarians permeate the volume, juxtaposed with works not usually considered as southern, such as Linda Hogan’s *Power*, or literary, such as *Southern Living*

2. Tara McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2003) 18.

magazine. Finding that “in a postmodern world, premodern and modern conceptions of place are inevitably insufficiently fluid” (4), Jones and Monteith seek a “traveling theory” of place that will simultaneously “inquire into new coordinates of southern identity” (9) and “tie the mythic southern balloon down to earth” (10). The goal is “to read region as a site of exchange” (10), and through diversity of approach and subject, the editors assert, the collected essays “succeed in opening up debates about regionalism precisely through their examination of canon and context” (11).

Questions of canon and context remain vexing ones in this volume, as in southern and American studies in general: it is here that nationalist conceptions of “imagined community,” in which regions function as subnational imaginaries, rub directly against transnationalist, postcolonial regionalisms, where region serves as an alternative or counternotion to the nation-state. “The American South”—only slightly second to America itself in the power of its canonized mythologies—has for over a century been critically and culturally configured as a type of nation, an “imagined community” or, more recently, “imagined communities,” with reinforcing narrative and real structures that powerfully resist displacement. Indeed, to displace “the American South,” with all its canons and nationalist imaginings, entirely in favor of transnational, though no less valid, connections, would be, ironically enough, to risk reperforming the type of institutionalized forgetting that Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* argued was essential to the process of nation-building. Jones and Monteith concede as much: “In *South to a New Place*, the American South remains the datum, a given whose mythic properties have traditionally exceeded its realities and that consequently impels continued investigation, but the novum, the new places that extend our understanding of the South beyond traditional conceptions of regionalism, demand our special attention” (2). As Paula Moya and Ramón Saldívar have recently argued, we are far from a “post-national” moment—the challenge for scholars of the “transnational” is not to refute the nation, but more accurately to map its borders of influence and interchange.³

3. Paula M. L. Moya and Ramón Saldívar, “Fictions of the Trans-American Imaginary,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 49 (2003) 1–18.

And so "datum" rests, sometimes uneasily, beside "novum" in this collection, in terms not only of texts and contexts but of critical legacy and focus. Fortunately both are represented by highest quality. Richard Gray's foreword, for example, is worth the price of the whole volume, not for innovation, but for the extraordinarily lucid, concise, and comprehensive compilation of the most important threads of thought in southern studies over the past twenty years. Invoking Benedict Anderson, Gray presents a self-conscious, self-fashioned "marginal" South, defined against a "reverse image of itself" as southerners have perceived themselves perceived by others. Acts of self-definition spring from "the need to make a place in the world with the aid of talk and ceremony, language and communal ritual" (xxiii); they are fictive, but not fake. Such fictions have always been open to plural readings, and the recent social and economic changes that "make cultural insularity close to impossible" have brought "an even more acute self-consciousness and an even greater pluralism than ever before" (xx). The South, then, is "an imagined community made up of a multiplicity of communities, similarly imagined"—a process of southern self-fashioning that has played "a decisive part in the making of America" (xxiii).

The collection's essays indeed exhibit self-consciousness and pluralism, and many of them move well beyond the nationalist framework established by Gray. Part 1, devoted to surveying and theorizing definitions of place and region, presents a range of responses. Scott Romine's "Where Is Southern Literature? The Practice of Place in a Postsouthern Age" provides a valuable, if problematic, overview of the traditional "sense of place" that is so often associated with southern regionalism. This sense of "place," Romine argues, is pragmatically dependent upon practice, a practice about which "a consensus has emerged" but that is now in crisis in this "time of transition" (24). After a cogent review of postmodern reformulations of place and narrative theory, Romine somewhat strangely returns to place "traditionally conceived" as a "deterministic geography" (that is, as "a distinctive limitation of the possibilities of plot, character, and narrative subjectivity" [41]) to ask whether southern literature can survive as such outside of this sense of place and the forms of representation it has engendered. The irony that he posits—that a culture that has famously prized

concreteness over abstraction may in the postmodern world come to exist only as “a condition of pure performativity”—is of course only ironic if one accepts the ways the South has “traditionally” been figured (including being rooted in deterministic geography) as outside the performative. Barbara Ladd’s “Dismantling the Monolith” moves away from the traditional to “reconceptualize place as a site of cultural dynamism” and to query the close association of “place” and regionalism in American literary mappings. Finding that “The *experience* of place remains dynamic and vital. It is the *theorizing* of place that is problematic,” Ladd argues that as regions increasingly surround transnational rather than national centers, place “needs to be constructed not as a stable site of tradition and history within a progressive nation but as something . . . dramatic and fleeting, produced by encounter, contingent” (56). In a similar vein, Jon Smith’s “Southern Culture on the Skids” moves deftly between psychoanalytic and postcolonial paradigms to argue that white southerners’ love of place is “largely just self-love displaced onto natural objects” (80), and to offer post-subcultural punk as a fetish-negating strategy that may help pry “white southern identity from its long, narcissistic gaze at its own ancestral navel” (95). Applying postcolonial and postmodern theorists such as Dick Hebdige, Homi Bhabha, Michael Kowalewski, and Barry Lopez over Anderson, Ladd’s and Smith’s articles comprise the strongest theorizations of southern hybridities unaccounted for in nationalist models. Rounded out by Carolyn Jones’s blues-inflected model of Albert Murray’s regionalism and Paul Lyons’s call (reprinted from *Studies in American Fiction*) for a critical regionalism that acknowledges tensions and leaves legible “betweenness,” the essays in part 1 constitute the most exciting and challenging work in the collection.

The eight essays in part 2, “Mapping the Region,” visit specific southern sites and populations—rural, urban, suburban, familiar and inaccessible—in ways that revise the traditional “sense of place” to make us, in Stephen Flinn Young’s phrase, “aware of the living thing that place really is” (13). Several of the essays are notable for their revisions of traditional southern tropes or literary modes such as Agrarianism or nature writing. In “I’ll Take My Land,” Suzanne Jones charts a contemporary agrarian movement in

which the enemies “are no longer specialization and mechanization but racism and self-deception” (146). In an essay subtitled “*Song of Solomon* and the Blasted Pastoral,” Wes Berry questions whether Milkman Dead’s moment of ego-dissolution in the Virginia woods is a parody of Anglo-American mystical nature writing or a new type of “progressive ‘nature writing’—one that sincerely considers the spiritual possibilities of human interaction with more-than-human life-forms, but that does so within a complex web of cultural and historical contexts” (164). The famous southern “love of place” is in these essays properly complicated by considering African American associations of southern land as a site of memory, of both communal identity and the violence of slavery, racism, and lynching. The point is extended further in Eric Anderson’s provocative analysis of Linda Hogan’s *Power*, in which he argues that Hogan deliberately renders aspects of her invented Florida Indian tribe and the natural ecosystem inaccessible, “muddy[ing] the already muddy waters” (182) to prevent readers from “playing Indian” and appropriating “Native wisdom” (176). Simultaneously laying claim to (by making visible) the South as the terrain of extant, continuing Native presence and limiting outsiders’ “presumed access” to this presence, Hogan’s novel serves “to stretch and complicate our understanding of both community and history, both American Indian literature and the South, both right ecological relations and wrong thinking” (183).

The question of access—who presumes to have it, over what bodies and places and “traditions”—is clearly central in attempts to “lay claim” to southern places, and thus to retheorize southern and American literary history. Several other essays in part 2 work to move populations and places historically positioned as “marginal” to the center of southern literary discourse and to query constructions of margin and center generally. Rural gay black men in Randall Kenan’s *A Visitation of Spirits*; the suburban zeitgeist of Richard Ford’s Sportswriter novels; the “world center” of Atlanta commerce in tension with its local politics in Tom Wolfe’s *A Man in Full*; multinational media capitalism’s role in shaping the South for tourism in *Southern Living*—these topics implicitly revise the traditional perimeters of southern place and literature and invite non-southernists to consider the extent to which southern “regional”

dynamics have always figured, or prefigured, the tensions in American national cultures. Maureen Ryan's "Outsiders with Inside Information: The Vietnamese in the Fiction of the Contemporary American South" stands out here for the sheer wealth of new literature Ryan presents to the southern canon, including one novel by a Vietnamese American southerner, Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* (1997), set in Arlington, Virginia's "Little Saigon." Ryan's analysis ranges from noting the similar concern for family, past, and land shared by traditional southern and Vietnamese cultures to tracing the continued legacy of racial tension and fear of the Other that characterizes some white southern characters' reaction to these new immigrant populations. Arguing that Americans and Vietnamese are "inextricably linked by their shared tragedy" into a type of cultural hybridism, Ryan concludes that this body of literature offers "fertile material for an exploration of that southern story of what Edward Ayers calls 'unresolved identity, unsettled and restless, unsure and defensive'" (252).

Part 3, "Making Global Connections," is on the surface the most radical configuration of the South as a "new place," but this section is ironically the least satisfying in the volume, due to its sheer scope and promise. Here, four eminently qualified scholars of southern literature outline innovative connections between the U.S. South and other world "regions," including southern Italy, East Germany, Latin America, and Great Britain. The lines of these connections move both ways, as in the "celtic cultural connections" elucidated by Helen Taylor, including the influence of Sir Walter Scott and British speech patterns in forming southern culture, and the British enthusiasm for *Gone with the Wind* and other things southern. Taylor asserts that the scholarly "search for roots has been transformed into a tracing of routes" (347) and illustrates this contention with a compelling reading of the trajectory of Mitchell's novel from its sequel, *Scarlett*, to its controversial parody, *The Wind Done Gone*, focusing especially on race and the displacing role of Ireland in these texts. Deborah Cohn's study of Faulkner's influence on Spanish American writers identifies common stylistic and thematic elements in the "boom" of Latin American writing from roughly 1950 to the mid-1970s, and again in more contemporary authors such as Rosario Ferré, which Cohn finds "demonstrate the

continuity of the southerner's appeal even as they reflect a sensibility that seeks to revise history and society from the perspective of women and blacks and to challenge the 'truths' of the 'white' patriarchy" (335). These essays are fine analyses of the ways regions and their literatures imagine themselves in relation to other regions.

Changing tack, Michael Kreyling's "Italy and the United States: The Politics and Poetics of the 'Southern Problem'" and Christine Gerhardt's "North, South, East, West: Constructing Region in Southern and East German Literature" demonstrate how comparative transnational analysis can illuminate the construction and function of region itself. Kreyling's contribution starts off with a list of coincidences in the histories of southern Italy and the American South, parallels that Kreyling asserts are "more than coincidental." "The term *South*," he finds, "especially when embedded in the discourse suggested by the ubiquitous phrase 'The *Problem* of the South,' signifies the knot of contradiction generated by nostalgia for 'continuous cultures and traditions' in collision with the modern West's investment in progressive history, as limned in the successful histories of nations" (286). Tracing a trajectory of "similar politics and poetics," Kreyling charts a transition between earlier nationalist moments, where "South" signifies resistance to developing narratives of nationalist identity, to a postmodern or "posthistorical" phase in which "the cultural work of 'South' is not so much nationalization as it is relief from the ennui of accomplished modernity" (288). Kreyling is of course discussing dominant nationalist imaginings of "South": the limitations of his paradigm for Souths that include the African American or Vietnamese American experiences highlighted in part 2 are clear, though they are completely unmentioned by Kreyling, as is for that matter the racial prejudice historically leveled against southern Italians. Christine Gerhardt's parallel of East German and southern regionalisms does take into account African American responses to constructions of southernness as one of three in-common positionings of "marginal" regions vis-à-vis their respective dominant cultures. Concurrent with the idealized cultural spaces created in literature by characters who passionately enact their socially prescribed roles, Gerhardt outlines a critical tradition, exemplified by

Charles Chesnutt's "The Passing of Grandison" (1899) and Stefan Heym's "Mein Richard" (1976), where region is depicted as a "geographically and ideologically limiting space," and where "culturally specific repressions and restrictions are represented" (309).

For all their innovation, the essays in part 3 have an introductory feel. This is perhaps the hazard of attempting such large comparative work in the small confines of an essay. Both Taylor's and Cohn's essays are reprinted or excerpted from larger works; only in a more extensive format could claims connecting two separate traditions be developed to the satisfaction of readers who have more than cursory knowledge of either. Similarly, Diane Robert's afterword will strike scholars of southern literature as an introductory, if incisive, overview of well-known literary and cultural history. But this is to identify another strength, rather than a liability, of *South to a New Place*. As a compendium of some of the best new, excerpted, and reprinted work from the previous five years, this volume serves a vital function as an introduction to currents in both national and transnational literary criticism, for both specialists and newcomers to southern literature. The promise of this work and of its overall project of reconceptualizing region will be clear to all scholars interested in more accurately mapping the multinational, multicultural routes that constitute American literary history.

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