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*Possessing the Past: Trauma, Imagination, and Memory in
Post-Plantation Southern Literature* by Lisa Hinrichsen
(review)

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BOOK REVIEW

Hinrichsen, Lisa. *Possessing the Past: Trauma, Imagination, and Memory in Post-Plantation Southern Literature*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2015. 304 pp. \$45.00 cloth.

ALTHOUGH MANY CRITICS NOW ASSUME THAT THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY leaves no room for a distinctive South, Lisa Hinrichsen, in *Possessing the Past: Trauma, Imagination, and Memory in Post-Plantation Southern Literature*, insists on a South that is kept surprisingly cohesive by narratives that broadcast homogenous expectations regarding subject positions and social hierarchies. In other words, many stories continue to construct myths of white Southern identity in order to preserve regional solidarity. Hinrichsen uses the phrase “fantasies of mastery” to refer to these cultural myths, which support the dominant ideologies by parading as historical memory. While Southern literature is often a vehicle used to congeal the South through these exclusionary fantasies of mastery, Hinrichsen examines texts by authors such as William Faulkner, Lillian Smith, and Lan Cao that attempt (with varying degrees of success) to uncover the destructive consequences of oppressive hegemonic myths.

Hinrichsen builds from the work of scholars such as Patricia Yaeger and Michael Kreyling who attend to issues of trauma, memory, and history in the South. Grounding her analysis in trauma studies and psychoanalytic theory, Hinrichsen argues that the events of history have psychological effects. Trauma plays a key role in the fantasies of mastery Hinrichsen analyzes: by understanding themselves as traumatized, white Southerners assume that they are fundamentally different from the rest of the nation. Southerners, according to Hinrichsen, use their supposedly unique connection to defeat and backwardness to justify past and present race-based injustices. This regional sense of distinction is maintained by much of Southern literature, but questioned by the novels, plays, and memoirs that Hinrichsen examines. Reading these Southern narratives through the lens of trauma theory, Hinrichsen emphasizes not only that the South imagines its own wounds but also that it fetishizes them. In the case of Southern literature, fetishism entails a mythologizing of history through repeatedly imagining a moonlight-and-magnolia past

and repeatedly insisting on the trauma resulting from the Civil War. Repetition of old fantasies and fetishization of lost social and economic stability forms a heritage that provides the illusion of regional solidarity. Psychoanalytic theory provides a way for Hinrichsen to extend the conclusions gained from trauma theory by applying the experience of trauma to the formation of subjectivity. Perhaps the most powerful aspect of Hinrichsen's book is her use of psychoanalysis to understand, not a universal human identity, but a specifically Southern identity affected by trauma.

Hinrichsen analyzes texts that attempt a genuine working through of this trauma—a working through that entails ideological and psychological struggle. Her first two chapters position William Faulkner and Tennessee Williams as writers interrogating the consequences of white Southern denial of regional violence. In her analysis of Faulkner's *Sanctuary* and *Requiem for a Nun*, Hinrichsen illuminates the law as a patriarchal construction that appears to master trauma through the prosecution of crime but that fails to recognize the true trauma experienced by women and people of color. For example, lawyers pressure Temple Drake, an Ole Miss debutante, to accuse Lee Goodwin, a moonshiner, of raping her in order to corroborate evidence that Lee murdered his laborer. Temple is never able to provide a true narrative of the violence, and Popeye, the actual rapist, remains unprosecuted. In her analysis of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Hinrichsen examines Blanche, a romantic belle who has lost her family plantation to creditors and moves into her sister's apartment in New Orleans. Hinrichsen frames Blanche's performance of gentility and glamour as a fantasy that excuses her from reckoning with historic and personal trauma. In her next two chapters, Hinrichsen explores strategies that the South and the nation use to deny guilt and accountability. Examining three autobiographies—Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin's *The Making of a Southerner*, Lillian Smith's *Killers of the Dream*, and Willie Morris's *North Toward Home*—Hinrichsen reveals the way white Southerners lay claim to injury by rewriting racial cruelty as trauma shared by the white and black community. In the next chapter, Hinrichsen analyzes Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country* and Clyde Edgerton's *The Floatplane Notebooks*, two novels that focus on the aftermath of the Vietnam War, arguing that the war caused the sense of shame endemic to the South to spread to the rest of the nation. Like the

South, the nation must resort to denial of guilt and fantasies of mastery in order to maintain belief in its own innocence.

Hinrichsen's work culminates with the examination of contemporary texts from Erna Brodber, Roberto Fernández, Lan Cao, and Monique Truong that use fantasy and magical realism to challenge essentialist ideas of Southern memory and community. In this chapter, Hinrichsen inverts her definition of fantasy: in works by and about people of color, fantasy becomes a powerful tool for acknowledging and working through trauma rather than ignoring and romanticizing it. These multicultural narratives stand as an example of the kind of cultural production that Hinrichsen sees as possibly revolutionary.

Ultimately, Hinrichsen calls on critics to destroy oppressive practices by, in short, thinking differently. Specifically, she suggests that readers and writers engage in Houston A. Baker, Jr.'s idea of "critical memory": memory that refuses nostalgia, instead connecting the past to the always-evolving present. Furthermore, she challenges scholars to continue making connections between the US South and Global Souths. She believes that these mental practices will provide a way for Southerners to break out of their fantasies of mastery and engage instead with artistic play, keeping Southern identity open to the possibility of evolution.

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