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Introduction: Mapping the Figurative South

Southern literature has comprised a myth-making as much as a place-making narrative – and a contested one as counter-narratives and competing stories intervene in its trajectory. The prevailing defensive symbolism of the "Old South," the "Lost Cause," generated in the nineteenth century assumed the image of a collective nostalgia for an antebellum South. Resistance to such myths was forged in the crucible of plantation slavery, in the Civil War, and in the Reconstruction era. African-American writers refused to concede a literary history filled with images of Civil War heroes, Confederate Dead, and martyred politicians, as canonized by Thomas Dixon in his Reconstruction Trilogy. This *Companion* examines the ways in which the region's writers have struggled over the dominant images of very different "Souths," nurturing and propagating them and resisting and rejecting them down the centuries.

It maps the southern literary landscape, taking different generic, thematic, periodized, and critical routes through regionally and nationally defined representations and their cycles and returns. Contributors pay attention to regional struggles that have taken place in a national frame because southern literature has played a key role in establishing a counter-narrative of exceptionalism to an industrializing North. Essays discuss the cultural multiplicity of the region's many constituencies that not only permits diversity into the traditional image of a racially bipolar South but also extricates the region from a national model and from a North-South binary. Southern literary culture now includes writing that engages the South even though it originates elsewhere, in the work of writers born on the region's borders like Toni Morrison in Ohio, or thousands of miles away like Monique Truong in Vietnam. The *Companion* closes by examining bicultural narratives that contribute to evolving regional identities.

Historical period is a determinant of the *Companion*'s line of inquiry, but genres do not maintain period boundaries, so essays make clear where a literary form established in one period has resonance in another. It is not

possible to understand the revisionist neo-slave narrative without recourse to nineteenth-century originals or to the politicized aesthetic forged in the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. Nor is it possible to appreciate literature about civil rights without considering that in the 1960s the era was often declared a "Second Reconstruction." C. Van Woodward keeps both periods in view throughout *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (1957), and Edmund Wilson maintained comparative frames in *Patriotic Gore* (1962), his study of Civil War literature, locating the intransigent segregationist backlash of the 1960s within the white South's continual rebellion against the federal government, "never forgiven for laying waste to their country, for reducing them to abject defeat and for the needling and meddling of the Reconstruction."[1] The language used is evocative, and it is unsurprising that the same imagery-laden and transhistorical framework should animate much southern fiction.

By following different paths through the history of Southern literature, this volume tracks developments in literary criticism, from writing in periodicals that enjoyed a wide circulation before and after the Civil War and promulgated a romantic version of slavery, to the literary endeavor to facilitate the reconstruction of the nation that Scott Romine identifies in his essay as "the masterplot of Reconstruction, as both history and literature." As the nation modernized, key images of the South were of a retrograde racial system, with the cotton crop dictating the fiscal heath of the region – and its levels of poverty, as David Davis and Sarah Robertson explore from different perspectives, with Davis arguing that monocrop agricapitalism was so much more than a symbol because it "defined an elaborate system of race and class stratification that enforced the maintenance of a vast labor pool."

As agricultural laborers began leaving the South after World War I, so did many writers. The region's fiction travels further afield as Southerners and South-watchers reimagine the region from extrinsic vantage points. Literary movements, originally conceived to promote and sustain regional values and to canonize writers, have been expanded geographically, as well chronologically and ideologically, down the decades, but, as John T. Matthews notes of the Southern Renaissance label, "There are also good reasons to question its continued usefulness altogether." Pearl McHaney examines the category of "Southern women writers" and observes that "once its efficacy is accomplished, [a label] can occasionally be regrettable." The essays raise some knotty questions that readers may wish to examine when testing the parameters of the periods they study and the writers, movements, and genres they analyze. Judie Newman points out how many times the Southernness of the slave narrative, peculiarly American though the genre may be, has been ignored by critics, and she traces how that tendency continues in studies

of the neo-slave narrative that overlook its fictionalization of the South in favor of other "master categories, under the general headings of history and memory, gender, and postmodernism." Can one understand a slave narrative without understanding the South? Certainly, when one consigns Southern history to background or takes it "as read," more is lost than gained. Essays that investigate a genre or cultural form benefit from elasticity, leading Ernest Suarez to combine poetry with song lyrics and Gary Richards to examine drama alongside musical theater.

What will not be surprising to readers is that "classics" such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and *Gone with the Wind* (1936) should texture very differently inflected discussions. Readers, as well as writers and critics, respond to such texts differently in each era, because the fictions function as barometers of changing values, beliefs, and ideologies. In 1943, for example, Langston Hughes imagined what would happen if Hattie McDaniel ("Mammy" in David O. Selznick's blockbuster film) played Harriet Tubman, the abolitionist who escaped slavery and helped other slaves to freedom via the Underground Railroad, in what he imagined could be a "sure-enough *Gone With The Wind* that shows how slavery was wiped out and how courageous Negro men and women helped to wipe it out."[2] Hughes neither wrote that screenplay nor saw it performed. Some sixty years later, when Alice Randall wrote a riposte to *Gone with the Wind*, the African-American writer's parody from the point of view of Tara plantation slaves was initially blocked by Margaret Mitchell's Estate. Other writers, among them Harper Lee and poet Yusef Komunyakaa, along with literary critics and historians, petitioned in Randall's behalf, rallying to her defense on the grounds of free speech. *The Wind Done Gone* (2001) was published after an Atlanta court's banning of the work – citing copyright infringement on the original – was overturned. Writer and critic Tony Earley enfolded Randall into Southern literary history when he endorsed the novel as the "connective tissue" binding "the fairytale of *Gone With the Wind* to the gothic nightmare of *Absalom, Absalom!*"[3] Familiar fictions mark the changing contours of Southern literary culture.

Kathryn B. McKee (Chapter 1) opens the volume by demonstrating the heterogeneity and fluidity of writing in the nineteenth century, an era typically understood as split rigidly along generic lines into sentimental literature, Southwestern humor, plantation fiction, reconciliation romance, anti-reconciliation literature, and local color writing. She begins in the 1830s, the decade that most scholars agree signaled the shift to sectional self-interest that promoted the South as a cultural, as well as a political, entity. Seeing the nineteenth century as "little more than a seedbed for the twentieth" was a

dominant view until the end of the 1980s, and McKee unpacks how literary culture loosened that critical impasse as she investigates the extent to which Southern literature was crucial in fashioning the national story and "has much to reveal about how Americans made sense of their self-contradictory country at a crucial moment in its development."

Judie Newman's analysis of the slave narrative in Chapter 2 traces the cultural logic of the form via personal and fictionalized accounts by Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs through many innovative revisions of the form. As she notes, "The story[of slavery] needs to be told anew to avoid it becoming familiar and our sympathies blunted – that is the risk of genre." Newman reveals how the genre was extended in a "reverse slave narrative" like Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), for example, and in Edward P. Jones *The Known World* (2003), which explores the multiple (and contested) mental and geographical cartographies according to which slavery may be mapped. Newman also analyzes novels by white writers from outside the region and, indeed, the nation, which borrow from the slave narrative: Harriet Beecher Stowe in the nineteenth century, Margaret Atwood and Joan Brady in the twentieth, and Bernardine Evaristo in the twenty-first.

In Chapter 3, building on his work in *The Civil War in American Culture* (2006), Will Kaufman explores the "appeal to sentiment" that Civil War apologists harnessed to tell the story of the war. He shows how African-American writing critiqued "Lost Cause apologia" in the nineteenth century and analyzes writers who refined the antebellum South as a wellspring of pastoral nostalgia in the twentieth, as in *Gone With the Wind*, and Caroline Gordon's *None Shall Look Back* (1937) overlooked amid the hullabaloo surrounding Mitchell's Civil War romance. The war was a source of sensationalism in James Street's Mississippi-set *Tap Roots* (1942), and a revisionist fantasy in which the Confederate South wins in Ward Moore's science fiction story *Bring the Jubilee* (1952), but Kaufman also takes stock of quieter analytical fictions like Ellen Glasgow's *The Battle-Ground* (1902). Mapping Civil War literature across some 150 years, he concludes that "the war's end in the South's literary practice … is not yet in sight."

Once the Civil War was over, Reconstruction was the period in which the idea of a "solid" white South was established as a monolithic bastion against black progress. Scott Romine's essay (Chapter 4) traces the role literature played on either side of the sectional conflict to shape images of Reconstruction. He examines writers students may discover here for the first time, like John William De Forest and Constance Fenimore Woolson, reading them alongside George Washington Cable and Frances E.W. Harper. Albion Tourgée sits between the writers who have been neglected and their much-studied contemporaries. Tourgée wrote the first major novel about

Reconstruction, *A Fool's Errand*, in 1879 and in tracing his career, Romine makes a case for (re)reading his works because "no writer had been more acute in critiquing Reconstruction's shifting position in the national consciousness." While Romine allows that historians have done more to blast partisan myths than twentieth-century writers, he closes by examining those modern fictions that do return to the era, notably Howard Fast's *Freedom Road* (1944), a novel that closes with Fast asserting that the eight-year experiment of Reconstruction was expunged from popular memory precisely because it had worked to forge an alliance between freed blacks and poor whites. It is not surprising, then, that it was studied in Freedom Schools in the civil-rights 1960s.

In Chapter 5, Ernest Suarez traces the relationship between Southern verse traditions. European verse influenced Edgar Allen Poe's and Sydney Lanier's poetics in the nineteenth century, but early in the twentieth, poets associated with *The Fugitive* magazine turned away from previous practices to develop a literary movement that morphed into the Southern agrarianism of *I'll Take My Stand*, which after 1930 crystallized as a model for literature that would hardened into conservative myth and ideology. Suarez examines key figures in Southern poetry and shows how John Crowe Ransom's lyric forms and local settings influenced another line of poets including Donald Justice, Charles Wright, and Ellen Bryant Voigt, and how Robert Penn Warren, Randall Jarrell, and James Dickey's narrative practices influenced Eleanor Ross Taylor, Dave Smith, and David Bottoms. Also in the late nineteenth century, another verse tradition emerged in the form of African-American spirituals and "field hollers," which melded into the blues ballad, a form that impacted the poetry of Jean Toomer, James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, and Sterling Brown. Hughes and Robert Kaufman drew on Southern musical forms in jazz poetry. During the closing decades of the twentieth century, Suarez delineates, with close attention to aesthetics, how writers combined verse traditions from white and black "Souths" to create a new Southern poetry that emphasizes performance and is often set to music.

In Chapter 6, David A. Davis examines the fundamental irony of Southern modernism, the tension between the uneven development of modernity in the South and Southern writers' literary innovation. Opening with Faulkner's description of the buckboard as a cubist bug in *As I Lay Dying* (1930), he reads the works of a diverse body of writers to compare the urbanism, industrialism, and progressivism associated with modernity to the ruralism, agrarianism, and conservatism associated with the South. In this way, Davis examines how Southern writers negotiated the ideological gap that separated the South from modernity and also shows how reactionary

conservatism played out in a number of ways in fiction between 1900 and 1940 through depictions of Prohibition, Jim Crow Laws, evangelism, lynching, anti-suffrage, and sharecropping.

The Southern states have been represented as the poorest and least progressive, with President Roosevelt claiming the South to be the nation's "No. 1 Economic Problem" in 1935 and Martin Luther King Jr., visiting an Alabama plantation in 1965, shocked to discover that sharecroppers had never seen U.S. currency because their commissary still traded only in "scrip" or credit. In Chapter 7, Sarah Robertson traces Southern literary responses to issues around poverty and social progress and investigates the ways in which epithets such as "redneck" and "white trash" – what Southerners supposedly became when they fell out of the working class into dissolution – have resonated in Southern writing, but also how some contemporary writers have rescued them from only being understood as terms of opprobrium.

John T. Matthews in Chapter 8 details the regional self-scrutiny that marked fictions published between the 1920s and 1945, when Allen Tate designated the period representative of a "Southern Renascence" according to which the South was a traditional antidote to a supposedly inauthentic industrializing North. Matthews demonstrates "how falsifying simple definitions of a Southern Renaissance may once have been, and how the complexities of Faulkner's writing correspond with much-expanded definitions of this broad event in modern culture." It is axiomatic to assert that Faulkner's fiction maps the primary themes of Southern literature, so much so that Michael Kreyling, in a paradigm-breaking text he boldly titled *Inventing Southern Literature* in 1998, observed with some irony that "if 'the South' is a cultural entity, then 'Faulkner' is its official language."[4] Here Matthews creates a taxonomy of the tropes through which Faulkner – and also many of his contemporaries – engaged the South – plantation, land and labor, race, desire, language – and through carefully wrought examples proves why it was difficult for those like Allen Tate to recruit Faulkner to their "traditionalist" concerns. In so doing, Matthews maps the history of Faulkner criticism and finally conjures a twenty-first-century Faulkner, who "in a maximized conception of the Southern Renaissance, might reveal how both figure in cultural representations of global modernity."

In Chapter 9, Pearl Amelia McHaney investigates the influence that Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers, and, in turn, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison had on younger generations of women writers. McHaney unpacks the "brand" that is "the" Southern woman writer and considers who lies outside the brand, left to thrive under labels of "African American, Latina, 'white trash,' lesbian, and/or feminist writers." Her essay

endeavors to be inclusive in its reconceptualization of the breadth and heterogeneity of fictional and non-fiction writing by women, including Gayl Jones, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Natasha Tretheway, and Jesmyn Ward, who wrestle with labels and who reveal across a plethora of cultural forms why, as well as how, they continue to tell stories about the South.

Sarah Gleeson-White also intervenes in the category "Southern literature" to examine the Southern writer in Hollywood. While film scholars have introduced the "Southern" into discussions of Hollywood genres,[5] the presence of writers in Hollywood, and of Southern novels and stories on the screen, is an evolving area of research. In Chapter 10, Gleeson-White details how Southern writers and journalists carved out alternative careers as screenwriters. She shows that they were expected to bring a representative "Southernness" to bear on the movies, and traces the idea through the Hollywood sojourns of William Faulkner, Walker Percy, Horace McCoy, in the studio era, and Barry Hannah and others later. With a dual focus on the Southern Hollywood novel and the film screenplay, she examines how the region's writers' engaged Hollywood cinema and film production.

Chapter 11 argues that critics and reviewers in the 1960s overlooked fictions published in the era that represented the civil rights movement. I uncover fictions that depicted the courage of black Southerners and civil rights organizers, massive resistance to their initiatives, and racial terrorism – many of which were written by African Americans including Junius Edwards, Michael Thelwell, Alice Walker, and Henry Dumas. I analyze the cultural work typically undertaken to contain race relations within a more positively curated image of the region according to which, as Louis Rubin claimed in 1961, "important though the race problem may be, most people, even in the South, do not spend every waking moment thinking of it." This essay also examines depictions by those white Southern writers who thought about civil rights enough to reveal the troubled conscience of Southern gradualists, before it turns to contemporary writers. I conclude that: "Civil rights stories are as heterogeneous as their authors; they cross periods and genres and historical momentum and their continuing relevance carries them into the twenty-first century."

In a wide-ranging essay mapping Southern drama, Gary Richards (Chapter 12) begins by examining why the South has "rarely been scripted as central to the nation's history of writing, producing, and attending drama" in scholarly histories of the theater. He traces Southern performance from seventeenth-century Virginia and metropolitan theater culture in antebellum Charleston and New Orleans before tracking dramatic forms like minstrelsy into the twentieth century. He analyzes the South's acclaimed playwrights, like Lillian Hellman and Tennessee Williams, and explores stage adaptations

of novels, including Erskine Caldwell's best-selling *Tobacco Road* (1932). Richards's research reveals the eclecticism of the Southern theatrical marketplace. Despite, and indeed because of, his conclusion that "the South's relation to theater remains a troubled one," his survey also points to possible avenues for further scholarship.

Building on his work in *Cotton's Queer Relations* (2009), and on Gary Richards's *Lovers and Beloveds: Sexual Otherness in Southern Fiction, 1936–1961* (2005), Michael P. Bibler in Chapter 13 explores homosexual and homoerotic readings of Southern texts in an essay that weaves across centuries to include discussion of domestic fiction, dime novels, and stage plays. Bibler locates a long tradition of homosociality in Southern writing because queering the South offers ways to understand "the complex deployments of gender, desire, and eroticism both prior to the invention of homosexuality as a category and in relation to the region's diverse cultural topographies." He follows the "interwoven strands of gothicism, humor, eroticism, and gender play" among which queer narratives may be uncovered. He examines Truman Capote and Tennessee Williams, as might be expected, but also Ann Allen Shockley who in 1974 wrote the first novel to explore an interracial lesbian relationship in detail to a very mixed critical reception.[6] Bibler's wide-angled critical lens reveals queerness in a plethora of popular cultural forms including the graphic novel.

In Chapter 14, Nahem Yousaf explores contemporary fictions that "project the regional studies model outwards to forge spatial connections across more fluidly conceptualized landscapes," particularly narratives by new immigrants to the U.S. South and writers of bicultural heritage, but also fictions by Southern writers, black and white, who open up to new scrutiny "typical" concerns, such as the plantation South and labor on the land, civil wars, and civil rights. These include Lan Cao, Susan Choi, Gustavo Pérez Firmat, Monique Truong, and Marcos Villatoro, as well as Robert Olen Butler, Cynthia Shearer, and even John Grisham. Characters of different ethnic heritages further dispel the myth of a static racial landscape, and Yousaf pays attention to the ways in which the New Southern Studies facilitates study of such fictions and closes by reading Monique Truong's novel *Bitter in the Mouth* (2010), which borrows from *To Kill A Mockingbird* but tells a very different story of a family in the small-town South.

Reading and studying Southern literature now, one enters a digital network of sites and cyberspaces, whether reading poems posted by locals post-Katrina on the Hellicane blogspot, downloading the latest edition of *New Stories From the South* to a Kindle, tweeting a review of a new novel, or evaluating a new essay collection on the region for H-Net Southern Literature

(www.h-net.org/~southlit), the discussion forum that British critic Martyn Bone founded in 2007 and developed in conjunction with the Society for the Study of Southern Literature. This *Companion* encourages readers to take circuitous conceptual routes through Southern culture whereby analyzing the traditional motif of "a sense of place" is to recognize the region as polyphonic, and its stories as syncretic, not least when they cross borders in a hemispheric South. If a "global" and Internet South risks becoming less regionally distinctive, and less "real," it will not become less "Southern" – and, in any case, telling about the South has never been solely a regional affair. Contributors to this volume, from the South but also from the northern United States and from Australia and Europe, signal something of how Southern scholarship has always developed in national and international contexts.

Jon Smith's 2002 pen portrait of what he thought a New Southern Studies scholar would be like in the twenty-first century is a description that bears returning to periodically. She or he, Smith predicted, would need to be versed in postcolonial theory and local and global conceptual models, to demonstrate expertise in minority literatures, to be able to read French and Spanish, and to demonstrate a knowledge of the Caribbean countries that are the U.S. South's near neighbors, and of immigration patterns into and across the region.[7] While the ability to read foreign languages, especially because so many are spoken in the region, remains most difficult to evidence in contemporary literary criticism, other qualities Smith noted are not, as the essays which bookend this *Companion* show. Even when the critic casts back to literature produced in the 1830s, 1850s, and 1880s, as Kathryn B. McKee does, she discovers the "interlocality" in what she reads in the hemispheric concerns of a neglected woman writer, Sherwood Bonner, whose southern stories alluded to Persia and Madagascar as well as Europe. And, as Nahem Yousaf demonstrates, in contemporary writing, "stereotypes of the insularity of southern literature are proved untenable when fictions equate the region with other 'Souths'."

Literary texts, like historical moments, are neither static nor limited to their place or moment of production; our understanding of them evolves with a changing historiography and cultural geography. The literary-critical history of the U.S. South still contains unexplored routes, and this *Companion* does not pretend to be exhaustive. Instead, it was conceived and is presented as a series of interconnecting and thought-provoking sources for discussion and debate for students of literature and culture. Hopefully it also answers a question that one of my students asked recently. He was reading the short story that Monique Truong wrote while a student at Yale in 1991, based on her experience of living in North Carolina as refugee from Saigon in 1975; it

is a story Truong tells again and differently in *Bitter in the Mouth*, as Yousaf explores. This short story led my student to inquire: Why is it that even writers who were not born there seem to have the same compunction as those who were, like Faulkner, to continually "tell about the South"? I hope that when he reads the essays in this *Companion*, he will find that its contributors answer his question in some detail.

NOTES

1 Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. xxi.
2 Langston Hughes, "Is Hollywood Fair to Negroes?" *Negro Digest* 1: 6 (April 1943), pp. 19–21.
3 Tony Earley, blurb for Alice Randall, *The Wind Done Gone* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001) and deputation recorded by Randall's publisher at http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/features/randall_url/pdf/Declaration_Anton_Mueller.pdf. Accessed 30 March 2012.
4 Michael Kreyling, *Inventing Southern Literature* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), p. 127.
5 See Warren French, "'The Southern': Another Lost Cause?" *The South and Film*, ed. W. French (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1981), pp. 3–13, and for a critical overview, *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*: *Media*, eds. Allison Graham and Sharon Monteith (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), pp. 1–30.
6 Monteith, *Advancing Sisterhood? Interracial Friendships in Contemporary Southern Fiction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), pp. 173, 204, n. 21.
7 Jon Smith, "Postcolonial Theory, the US South and New World Studies," *Society for the Study of Southern Literature Newsletter* 36: 2 (Fall 2002), p. 11.