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Who Is a Southern Writer?

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Richard Ford's response to a questioner at the University of Mississippi symposium—that he is "southerner" but not a "southern writer"—makes him only the latest in a long line of distinguished writers who grew up in the South, but have refused to be corralled into a regional stall. Other contemporary writers from the South, feeling "left out" of a potentially profitable niche market, have sought to broaden the definition of "southern literature."[1] Instead of worrying about who qualifies as a "southern writer" or rigidly delimiting "southern literature," we might more fruitfully ask questions about who is writing about the U.S. South (no matter their birthplace or residence), what stories they are telling, what images they are conjuring up, and most importantly why.

International writers

Many more international writers than V. S. Naipaul have taken a turn in the South. It's time we looked more closely at their work. For example, bestselling British novelist Joanna Trollope, known for her fiction about families in crisis in provincial English settings, sets half of a recent novel in Charleston, South Carolina, so that she can juxtapose what she sees as the atomizing of British families with families she presumably thinks are the more close knit. She titles her novel simply, *Girl from the South*, as if every one of her readers in the UK (and in the world for that matter) would know which South. Journalist Gary Younge, feeling alienated in his native Britain, recently followed the route the Freedom Riders took through the South in 1961 and discovered that he feels more at home in America than in Britain. He tellingly titled his book, *No Place Like Home: A Black Briton's Journey Through the American South*. Younge's

journey, however, rarely took him off the beaten path marked by unified black communities and persistent white racism that he mapped before leaving home.

Sometimes such books as Trollope's and Younge's reveal little more about "the South" than the stereotypes visitors bring with them, and thus they work to reify old ways of thinking about southern regional distinctiveness—its eccentric, extended families and its perennially tense race relations. At the same time, they reveal a great deal about the other culture's social concerns and racial tensions. However, just as often international writers nimbly take readers back to the South's past for a new look at slavery's complexities, as Fred D'Aguiar does in *The Longest Memory*, or they train a cosmopolitan lens on what has been called southern regional distinctiveness ,as Edouard Glissant does in *Faulkner, Mississippi*. In *Circling Dixie* Helen Taylor takes another tack and splendidly illustrates how Britain has borrowed southern writers such as Tennessee Williams and venues such as New Orleans for their own cultural productions and advertising purposes. All of these international books, be they popular bestsellers or literary prize-winners, reveal the power of the U.S. South in the global imagination.

Immigrant writers

Writers who are new immigrants to the South can also help us think globally and comparatively about the region. A growing population of immigrants from the Caribbean, Mexico, and southeast Asia, especially Vietnam, has complicated the region's predominantly biracial history and led to an outpouring of new novels in the 1990s. In *Natives and Newcomers* southern historian George Brown Tindall pointed out how the new immigrants have made race relations in the region quite literally less black and white. Now first and second generation immigrants to the South have begun to write their own stories. [2] In Gustavo Pérez Firmat's memoir *Next Year in Cuba*, he defines the "new relation" that he found between person and

place after growing up in Cuba and then spending his adolescence in Florida: "Although it may seem that in order to move past exile one has to renounce one country for another, I prefer to think that moving past exile means staking out a place that spans more than one country, more than one culture, more than one language" (13).

Several new novels, like Firmat's memoir, engage not only generic concerns of new immigrants to America, but specific issues of living in an American region that comes with its own definitions, whether geographical, historical, ideological, cultural, or mythic. Roberto G. Fernández's *Holy Radishes!*, Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge*, and Susan Choi's *The Foreign Student* tell new stories about southern race and ethnic relations that realign racial conflicts and change the mix of cultural cross pollination in the South. In *Holy Radishes!*, Cuban-American writer Fernández focuses on two displaced women in a small town in the Florida everglades—one from Tallahassee and the other from Xawa, his fictional Cuba. Ironically they connect through the fantasies they share, spun from pasts constructed in large part out of familiar southern and Cuban stereotypes, some overlapping. In Vietnamese immigrant Cao's *Monkey Bridge* Mai Nguyen finds herself caught between two worlds, much like the Asian-American protagonists in fiction set in California, but Mai lives in the more unfamiliar immigrant literary territory of Virginia. In Choi's *The Foreign Student* a Korean exchange student at Sewanee "locates himself" in uncomfortably alienating moments through the Tennessee hills that remind him of home (53). But it is his relationship with a wealthy young woman from New Orleans that will not allow him to forget the complexities of border crossings, and it is his presence in Tennessee that forces him to rethink the American presence in his homeland. Such novels rethink the South and southern identity, even as they remind readers that the contemporary South through immigrant eyes looks a lot like America.

Other Americans

Native Americans who are not native to the South continue to find the region fascinating. Tony Horwitz, recently returned from covering civil unrest in Ireland, Bosnia, and the Middle East, analyzes the lingering effects of America's own civil war in *Confederates in the Attic*. He is captivated by the current craze for battlefield reenactments that brings together an odd mix of liberal white southerners disaffected with the pace of contemporary life and unreconstructed neo-Confederates disgruntled with affirmative action. He ferrets out both the rebel mania present on a small but troubling scale throughout the rural South and a parallel strain of black nationalism in a private school in Selma, where teenagers learn that all whites are suspect and that blacks favor of integration are sell-outs. In contrast, in *South of Haunted Dreams* black journalist Eddy Harris found that the contemporary South hardly resembles the place that his grandparents fled during the Great Migration north. He motorcycled down from New York and discovered cultural roots in the South that he had failed to find during a similar journey in Africa. In her new novel *Half a Heart* Rosellen Brown, a native Philadelphian who taught at the University of Houston, examines not only race relations but definitions of racial identity through the relationship between a Jewish woman from Houston and her biracial daughter, who until age eighteen lived with her African American father in New York.

The 2000 U.S. Census revealed that in the 1990s more African Americans moved to the South than to any other region in the country, making it the only region where more African Americans arrived than left. Encouraged by better economic opportunities, improved race relations, and old familial and cultural ties, the return of African Americans to the South, which began in the 1970s, increased dramatically in the 1990s, giving the Southeast 55% of the country's black population.[3] This return is being documented in a variety of interesting ways

from anthropologist Carol Stack's *Call to Home* to literary critic Houston Baker's *Turning South Again*. Other writers like Carrie McCray in *Freedom's Child: The Life of a Confederate General's Black Daughter* or most notably Annette Gordon-Reed in *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* are revising public versions of southern history while some like Neil Henry in *Pearl's Secret: A Black Man's Search for his White Family* are uncovering family secrets of race mixing.

Southerners Abroad

Some novels positioning the South in global context may not even be set in the South. We must take a closer look at how these texts work in which southerners take their homegrown preoccupations abroad. I think of Barbara Kingsolver's *Poisonwood Bible*, which focuses on southern missionaries to Africa and documents the problems that Christian fundamentalism cause for both the southern family and the Congo town in which they settle. Shay Youngblood's *Black Girl in Paris* explores more positive aspects of expatriation, but reveals just as much about southern preoccupations. Far away from the demands of her Georgia family and friends, Youngblood's black protagonist feels "free" to act as she desires rather than as her black community might dictate: "I remembered that I was in Paris and there was no one to judge my actions, no one to remind me of my disloyalty to the race, to accuse me of losing my blackness, no one to remind me of the master-slave relationship. I was a free woman and could choose whom and what I wanted" (150). Eden's attraction to a white jazz musician allows Youngblood to reveal not only the choices such freedom brings, but the hybridity of southern culture—a fact that stands out more distinctly against the backdrop of another country.

As we cast our net globally in an attempt to see the South from new perspectives, we will be reminded that for contemporary writers, native and non-native to South, the region continues to be the fictional setting of choice for representing the United States' evolving thinking about black-white relationships and racial identity. But as critics we must be careful not to read old paradigms about southern race relations into these new stories. While contemporary white novelists are writing beyond what Fred Hobson calls the "racial conversion" narratives that preoccupied guilty southern white writers before the civil rights movement, a few African American writers have turned the tables and are examining black characters' stereotypes about white people. Although variations on older plots still show up, new plots have emerged that turn on previously forbidden cross-racial romantic desires, on social uncertainties in personal friendships, on questions about the future of the one-drop rule, on subtle and institutional racism, and on urban racial conflicts provoked by racial isolation, economic disparity, and residential segregation. These writers have found ways to model better interracial relationships and to promote racial reconciliation without succumbing to what cultural critic Benjamin Demott calls "friendship orthodoxy," the belief that interracial friendships alone can conquer racism, or what communications scholars Leonard Steinhorn and Barbara Diggs-Brown term the "integration illusion," fostered by ubiquitous mass media images of interracial buddies. As I argue in *Race Mixing,* recent fiction writers about the South often avoid these pitfalls by creating double endings, which may produce a happy ending for an interracial pair but withhold racial reconciliation for the larger community. Such double endings suggest that solutions are not simple and yet may work simultaneously to engage readers' desires to produce them.

Whereas an earlier generation of "southern writers" challenged the mythic unity of southern communities in order to lay bare racial divisions, contemporary writers about the U. S.

South challenge the mythic sameness of racial communities and question southern regional distinctiveness by employing a comparative transnational lens. Some of the most interesting contemporary "southern" writers like Fred D'Aguiar and Rosellen Brown did not grow up in the South; others like Barbara Kingsolver and Shay Youngblood did, but fled the South, only to find their way back and write it anew.

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[1] See Brinkmeyer's discussion of Ford as a southern writer gone west and Gwin's analysis of Ford as a postsouthern writer. In the introductory note to *That's What I Like (About the South)*,

George Garrett and Paul Ruffin explain why they anthologized the recent work of 33 writers from the South, "It seemed to us (and still does) that what didn't fit in with the definitions and generalizations of some prominent critics and editors— usually old-fashioned, shrugging, weary definitions— ended up being left out" (vii).

[2] Ryan analyzes this collection and other fiction about Vietnamese Americans while Yousaf and Monteith map other new immigrant terrain.

[3] Smith, A1, A10. The region the U.S. government defines as the South for census purposes includes Delaware, Maryland, Washington D.C., Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Tennessee, Kentucky, and West Virginia.