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Becoming South: Postmodern Southern Distinction

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BECOMING SOUTH: POSTMODERN SOUTHERN DISTINCTION

by

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ABSTRACT

Within Southern studies scholarship, much has been said (or told) about "the South" and southern distinction or essentialism. No one can define what, exactly, the South or southernness is, but we are determined to spend much energy and ink writing about it, anyway. Since the late 20th century, southern studies scholarship has largely followed a discourse-focused trajectory, and the popular (or at least the loudest) answers to questions about the South's distinction have often been angry "nos," critical rejections of a "special" South that functions—or even exists—outside of discourse. Though this line of inquiry is well-intentioned, it has done little but divide southern studies scholars into two sects: southern literary studies, which considers the South and its literature a distinct culture worthy of critical attention, and the new southern studies, a group that believes southernness is nothing but an ugly fantasy. The new visioning of the South that this project aims to produce, one that takes seriously both the material and the discursive, will disrupt the cycle in which Southern studies has found itself by offering an alternative middle ground that maintains the South's distinction without falling victim to essentialist folly.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Within Southern studies scholarship, much has been said (or told) about "the South" and southern distinction or essentialism. No one can define what, exactly, the South or southernness is, but we are determined to spend much energy and ink writing about it, anyway. I decided to explore this pervasive question not because I find it interesting or useful, but because I find it terribly uninteresting and silly. The notion that the South must be so thoroughly examined in order to be disproved is, to me, evidence enough of its effective existence, but many leading southern studies scholars think otherwise, and the field has spent decades trying to decide if the South is "real" or not. The critical attention given to this conversation leaves me scratching my head, but it seems that one cannot be a southernist without attending to it, and the engine driving this project is my desire to discover why so many smart, respectable scholars would devote time and effort to answering a question that does not seem to need asking.

I feel it is important to follow the path established by the many southernists who came before me and begin by revealing my own southern subjectivity. Having come from a long line of share croppers, pig farmers, power company linemen, and Southern Gospel singers, I am a product of the culture many southernist scholars say is not and was never there. I was raised in Florence, South Carolina (no relation to Dr. Rubin) but spent much of my childhood travelling from church to church and spreading the Good News. Though I take ownership over my personal southern history (not because it is good but because it

made me), I also wish to make it clear that, as someone who has experienced the silencing effects that lost cause or (what has been construed as) Agrarian ideation can produce, my goal for this project is not to extol the virtues of a distinct South or privilege a particularly Southern way of living. I am not a member of the old guard. However, the work to problematize an "essential" South has long been done; that is not my battle. The job I set out to do is to shine light on the discourse-based rendering of the South that looms over the field. The contemporary southern diaspora that I find myself situated in is not haunted by essentialism but by constructivism, and just as an essentialized South silenced some and gave voice to others in problematic ways, a South located solely in discourse has its own political agendas to serve. This project, then, does not aim to lay waste to new southern studies scholarship but, rather, to take its contributions and use them to new ends, ends that allow the South to exist and at in the world without praising it. Southern studies has operated on the false proposition that to believe in the South is to love it, and the work that follows hopes to prove this assumption wrong.

CHAPTER 2

A HISTORY OF SOUTHERN STUDIES

In the 1980s, armed with the theoretical tools made possible by postmodern literary and social criticism, a new branch of southernist scholars began poking holes in what they interpreted as a problematic conception of an essential, unified South. Under the emerging new southern studies paradigm, southern exceptionalism became nothing more than the politically-charged imaginings of post reconstruction era intellectuals¹, an artistic creation that, outside of discourse, was never really there at all. Southern studies scholarship has largely followed this discourse-focused trajectory, and the popular (or at least the loudest) answers to questions about the South's distinction have often been angry “nos,” critical rejections of a "special" South that functions—or even exists—outside of discourse (Kreyling; Duck; Yeager; Smith). Though this line of inquiry is well-intentioned, it has done little but divide southern studies scholars into two sects: southern literary studies, which considers the South and its literature a distinct culture worthy of critical attention, and the new southern studies, a group that believes southernness is nothing but an ugly fantasy (but still, apparently, worthy of study).

¹ The “nature of the relationship” (Rubin 4) between the South and Southern Literature has always sat center on the southern studies stage. In a 1972 conference paper, Louis D. Rubin, the primary foil in Michael Kreyling’s indictment against southern literary studies, made it clear that the discursive, literary South and the material south do not have “a one-for-one relationship” (4), that “there is more than one South” (5). It seems that southernists have never asked the South people live in to represent the South people write about, and the ease with which early southernist scholars have assumed the role of essentializing oppressor within the field’s most dominant narratives is best interpreted as an act of fiction rather than a re-visitation of fact.

The practical, obvious rebuttal to this line of reasoning is to cite the personal experiences of a people in a particular geographic space and the peculiar history attached to it as evidence to the contrary, to reply that the South is real because we experience it as such, and there is nothing a room of theory-heads can do to make us forget it. However, while lived experience may keep the South alive in the minds of southerners, it cannot stand firmly within the critical conversations circulating among southern studies scholars. Human subjectivity is highly contested, shaky ground, and using it as a foundation for a configuration of southernness handicaps the ideas that will follow from the very start. Put differently, since the individual as such does not occupy a privileged position of knowing in the majority of contemporary theoretical ideas and approaches, the personal experiences that many southern studies scholars call on as evidence that the South's existence are robbed of their force within the field. Further, with the troubled political and social history that comes with the South and its culture, most are hesitant, at present, to fight for it. Because southern studies has yet to develop a theoretical framework of southern distinction that does not reiterate problematic social hierarchies, arguing for a unique South is often conflated with arguing for traditional southern ideals and the harmful ideology on which it operates. Thus, southernists who continue to "believe" in the South have been silenced on the issue—they either ignore it or laugh at it, hopefully supposing that it will go away. But it has not, and it seems that the best response to the changes new southern studies has introduced to the field is to fight theory with theory, to meet theoretical ideas on their own ground and speak their language, thereby establishing a dialog that creates space for new, more informed ideas. The first step to beginning this

work is a critical analysis of the foundational ideas produced by new southern studies scholars.

CHAPTER 3

THE EMERGENCE OF NEW SOUTHERN STUDIES

Though new southern studies was first coined by Houston Baker and Dana D. Nelson (233), Michael Kreyling is arguably the figure most associated with the beginning of the movement. His arguments are the foundation upon which those after him would build. In his scholarly work, *Inventing Southern Literature*, Kreyling argues that southernness is not an independent entity but, rather, an invention influenced by the political and intellectual movement of the Southern (or Nashville) Agrarians, a group concerned with establishing a singular public vision of the South in which it—and thus they—remained unmarred by a turbulent historical past and an uncertain industrialized future. With his monograph, Kreyling reimagines southern intellectual history and paints the Southern Agrarians as the grand villains of a troubled culture. His rendition of the southern past is so masterful that it became a critical cornerstone for the work that would follow it. Kreyling may not have achieved his professed goal of “[dynamiting] the rails” (ix) of southern exceptionalism, but his work solidified the Nashville Agrarians’ ugly role in the field’s most accepted versions of southern history. However, suspending Kreyling’s characterization of the Southern Agrarians renders an alternative rendition of southern literature visible, a rendition that suggests the constructed South with which Kreyling takes such issue emerged long before the Southern Agrarians and, in fact, is present in the most southern of southern literature: the work of William Faulkner.

Despite Kreyling's preoccupation with proving the invented-ness of southern identity, his analysis overlooks a pivotal figure of southern fiction that, perhaps, speaks most directly to a conception of the South as invention: Thomas Sutpen of William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*. From his clearly constructed identity to his doomed attempt to invent a lifestyle based upon his interpretation of the southern ideal, Sutpen's story gives fictional life to Kreyling's theoretical ideas. However, analyzing these texts in conjunction to one another bears more fruit than an illustration of Kreyling's assertions. Recognizing the ways in which each author relies on the concept of invention to destabilize a singular version of the South and its history establishes a common ground between the two works that enables the texts to relate to each other—and the larger critical discussions about southern identity and history—in insightful ways. Indeed, putting Kreyling's *Inventing Southern Literature* and Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* into conversation with one another both allows the texts to perform different critical work and speaks to the pervasive role that the concept of southern invention has played—and continues to play—within Southern texts and the lives and minds of those who write and study them.

Described as possessing a “need for haste” (25) and a “furious impatience” (25), Thomas Sutpen is quite clearly characterized as a man ruthlessly determined to realize a “dream of castlelike magnificence” (29). The goal for which he aims is not mere grandeur, however; the image that Sutpen intends to achieve is that of the southern ideal. He states, “[y]ou see, I had a design in my mind. Whether it was a good or a bad design is beside the point...I had a design. To accomplish it I should require money, a house, a plantation, slaves, a family— incidentally of course, a wife. I set out to acquire these,

asking no favor of any man” (212). As many critics have noted, Sutpen’s fervent impulse to complete a specific majestic vision likely arises from a boyhood moment in which, after daring to approach the front door of a plantation house in Tidewater, Virginia, he is told “never to come to that front door again but to go around to the back” (188) by a slave. Sutpen’s rejection forces him to recognize the implications of class difference, and this recognition instills in him a burning desire to gain entrance to the ‘big house’². While imparting Sutpen’s story to Shreve, Quentin recalls his Grandfather’s rendition of the traumatic childhood moment in Sutpen’s history. Quentin states, “he knew that something would have to be done about it; he would have to do something about it in order to live with himself for the rest of his life” (189). Thus, after this defining event, the southern plantation becomes a symbol of Sutpen’s newly-perceived inadequacy, a symbol that he longs to possess and become ‘master’ of. Sutpen’s determination nearly pays off, and though he is a stranger in Jefferson “with little else but his bare hands” (39), he manages to procure one hundred square miles of land and erect a colossal plantation house.

However, more important to this conversation than the completion of his goal are the decidedly inventive means by which Sutpen’s vision is realized. The text describes Sutpen and his men “[dragging] house and formal gardens violently out of the soundless Nothing...creating the Sutpen’s Hundred, the *Be Sutpen’s Hundred* like the oldentime *Be Light*” (4). Here, the text draws a parallel between the erection of Sutpen’s Hundred and

² When defining Sutpen’s character, William J Lowder elaborates on the importance of this moment in Sutpen’s boyhood, claiming that “The rebuff at the front door...triggered the first and most important crisis in Sutpen’s life: he suddenly found himself on the threshold of self-encounter and free choice” (487). Daniel Spoth notices that the incident in Tidewater is when Sutpen first recognizes that the position of a ‘master’ that decides who is allowed or disallowed access exists (114).

Christian mythology's creation story. This connection imbues Sutpen's invention with a mythical property—just as the Christian God brought forth his vision of the earth, Sutpen “dragged house and gardens out of virgin swamp” (30) to create his southern ideal. The link between Sutpen's inventive process and the Biblical creation of the world is hyperbolic in a literal sense, but the shared image of manifesting a particular vision from nothingness certainly establishes an intimate connection between the two creation stories. Sutpen is not simply constructing a roof under which to live; he is forcing into being an invented design of mythic proportion. However, though this passage serves to correlate Sutpen's actions with those of the Christian creator, it also subtly foreshadows the futility of Sutpen's aims. Indeed, Sutpen builds his plantation out of “virgin swamp” (30), a source comprised of constantly shifting, decaying matter. Thus, the raw material employed to erect Sutpen's vision is inherently, organically linked with degradation and instability. When considered in light of Kreyling's assertions about the constructed nature of southernness, this idea not only foretells the ultimate destruction of Sutpen's Hundred, but it also points to the flaw in attempting to merge ideal with reality. That is, Sutpen's drawing his plantation from a malleable, ever-changing source can be mapped onto the southerner's attempt to build a history—an identity—from impermanent, man-created rhetoric.

Further, the presence of the French architect also speaks to the role that invention plays in the building of Sutpen's Hundred. Much like the “wild blacks” (4) employed to construct his plantation, the “captive” (4) French architect is employed as a tool to bring about Sutpen's vision. Specifically, the architect is described as an artist multiple times throughout the text. Grandfather Compson reflects that “he was a good architect...not

only an architect...but an artist since only an artist could have...borne Sutpen's ruthlessness and hurry" (28-29). The alignment of the architect with the role of an artist underscores that the building of Sutpen's home is a decidedly creative act. That is, his need for the artist-architect suggests that Sutpen aims to build more than mere brick and mortar; he intends to create—to invent—a design. The inventive elements of Sutpen's Hundred come into clearer focus when framed within the context of Kreyling's assertions about southern culture: with the building of his plantation, Sutpen uses his vision of the southern ideal as a blueprint for the invention of a tangible reality.

Sutpen's southern design is successfully completed with a respectable marriage to Ellen Coldfield and the birth of two legitimate children, but reality proves infertile soil for the fostering of ideals. In the years after the Civil War, fratricide, alcoholism, further miscegenation, and violent deaths weave their way into Sutpen's crumbling dynasty. The downward trajectory of Sutpen's legend culminates in his death at the hand of a poor white and the burning down of his beloved plantation house. Thus, though Sutpen strives tirelessly and laboriously to make his life mirror an invented image, he fails. Moreover, not only does he fail, but Sutpen's dogged insistence on a specific type of perfection is the catalyst for his ultimate doom. His dogged determination to "[build] his house, his mansion, apparently out of nothing" (7) serves as the defining factor that brings "his allotted course to its violent (Miss Coldfield at least would have said, just) end" (7). The rhetorical implications of his failure suggest that, regardless of one's determination and desire (for who could be more desirously determined than Thomas Sutpen?), one cannot wrestle an imaginary ideal from a concrete reality and expect fact and fiction to reside together harmoniously. This implied assertion illustrates that, much like the historical

invention of a manifest, solitary South, Thomas Sutpen's tragic fall operates upon and is ultimately hindered by the false belief in a mythologized South. Indeed, just as the Agrarians began an intellectual movement that aimed to invent a unified South but only served to create confusion and further fragmentation for those who study it, Sutpen's quest to invent an imagined ideal fails to establish the respectable legacy for which he seeks.

While Sutpen's actions and intentions provide readers with a poignant illustration of how the southern ideal is a willed, and ultimately false, invention, the critical work that Kreyling's ideas allow Faulkner's novel to accomplish is not limited to a revised reading of Sutpen's grand schemes—the text's presentation of Sutpen's character carries broader, historical implications when viewed in conjunction with Kreyling's ideas. Critics have long established that *Absalom, Absalom!* can certainly be interpreted as commentary on the construction of a historical narrative³. Though critics have tackled and attempted to reconcile this problematic coupling through a variety of critical methods, a direct application of Kreyling's theory of southern invention to Sutpen's story provides an alternative theoretical framework to employ when attempting to resituate and clarify the novel's relationship to history. Kreyling's ideas necessitate a shift in critical focus from the role that Sutpen plays within a specific historical narrative to what he and his narrators do within the text, thereby allowing Sutpen's story to sever its critical ties to an

³ Daniel Toth, Patricia Tobin, and Eric Casero, all cited in this essay, are a small sampling of the critical attention paid to *Absalom, Absalom!*'s relationship to history. Further, Cleanth Brooks asserts that “[m]ost important of all, however, *Absalom, Absalom!* is a persuasive commentary upon the thesis that much of ‘history’ is really a kind of imaginative construction” (34). Lynn Gartrell Levins states that “Faulkner fully intended the story of Thomas Sutpen...to be considered as a part of Southern history” (35).

explanation requiring it to fit into a particular historical narrative and become a symbolic representation of how southernness is created, mythologized, and ultimately propagated. That is, through the lens of southern invention, Sutpen continues to carry historical implications, but instead of representing what the South's history *is*—a representation that becomes problematic in any type of analysis—his tale becomes constitutive of how southernness is invented.

Many aspects of Kreyling's critical assertions make it a useful tool when considering Sutpen's story in relation to the southern history. An exploration and analysis of the South's literary tradition—a pivotal component of Kreyling's project—necessarily blurs the lines between an area's fictional past and its factual past by imbuing a region's fiction with the agency to do more than serve as a collection of imagined stories. When attempting to create or analyze a region's literary history, written works transform into culturally-inflected, historical artifacts. However, though the study of an area's literary history naturally makes itself useful to the study of that area's literal history, Kreyling's rendition of southern literature's historical trajectory becomes even more fruitful for the scholar wishing to make sense of a regional past. Kreyling makes it quite clear that he aims to do more than simply provide a summary of southern literary history. With his research, Kreyling intends to “interrogate the positivist position” (xii) and its influence on both the southern literary canon and southern culture. By building his argument on the assertion that the South's literature reflects and is complicit in the creation of a specific southern ideal that aims to “[keep] history at bay” (xii), Kreyling establishes an intensely dependent relationship between the two ‘types’ of history. This connection invites critics to extrapolate and map Kreyling's assertions about the ways in which southern invention

influenced the South's literary history onto the invention of a literal southern history; however, though Kreyling's analysis makes it clear that "myth and history feed one another" (xviii), he never fully explores how this idea functions within southern fiction. In other words, Kreyling analyzes southern literature in relation to how it supports or questions his theoretical conclusions about southern culture and identity, but he does not examine how those conclusions function within the narratives of fictional texts.

With the connection that Kreyling's conception of southern invention creates between the region's literary and literal histories in mind, Miss Coldfield and the Compsons' depictions of Sutpen not only function as examples of the fragmented interpretations of a person's character— an interpretation that has received much critical attention and exploration⁴—but also illustrate how humans invent and perpetuate myths in an effort to maintain and disseminate specific historical narratives. Kreyling asserts that the mythical becomes historical in how we use it to explain the past and preserve the future (xi); thus, *Absalom, Absalom!*'s narrators' inventions of Sutpen become myth-like in that they are created in an effort to reconcile each character's past with the version of the present that best suits them. The narrators' active involvement in the creation and manipulation of different versions of Sutpen's character highlights the ways in which

⁴ Eric Casero claims that "William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* throws the literary process of narration into serious question; the four main narrators of the story, as well as the 'nested' narrators who narrate from within the narratives of the primary narrators, present accounts of Thomas Sutpen's life that often include contradictory sets of detail and descriptive styles. Consequently, it becomes impossible for a reader to know precisely what happens in Sutpen's story or why and how it has attained any significance" (86). Jonathan S. Cullick acknowledges "that much has been written about point of view in *Absalom, Absalom!*, particularly focusing upon the storytelling and narratological functions of the various narrators" but expands this conversation to include Sutpen as another vessel of narration employed within the novel.

such invented ideals come into being: through the minds of the people who subsequently aim to live them.

Early in the text, Quentin makes it clear that Sutpen strikes a mythical figure in the history of Jefferson. He states, “[knowing about Sutpen] was part of his twenty years’ heritage of breathing the same air and hearing his father talk about the man; a part of the town’s—Jefferson’s—eighty years’ heritage...Quentin had grown up with that; the mere names were almost interchangeable and myriad” (7). Clearly, Sutpen comes to represent more than a mere man in the minds of the Jefferson townspeople. The first depiction of Sutpen comes from Rosa Coldfield, who “summons” (5) Quentin in order to tell her, and thus Sutpen’s, story. Though Rosa’s rage to explain her past is veiled behind the explanation that Quentin is a “Southern gentleman” (5) who may “write about it” (5) someday, Quentin quickly determines that “*she don’t mean [it]*” (5) and that the need to give her version of Sutpen’s character comes from a desire to invent a history in which she is the victor. Quentin thinks:

It’s because she wants it told he thought so that people whom she will never see and whose names she will never hear...will read it and know at last why God let us lose the War: that only through the blood of our men and the tears of our women could He stay this demon and efface his name and lineage from the earth. (6)

This passage suggests that the principle driving Rosa’s desire to impart her story to Quentin derives from a need to invent and propagate a version of history—a myth—explaining the fall of her family. She wishes to transform Sutpen into a figure which she can use to justify and make sense of her and her family’s actions. Rosa’s invention,

however, is not limited to a personal application. With the reference to the lost Civil War, the text suggests that Rosa intends to build a history that both vindicates her family and justifies the fall of her South; by fashioning Sutpen into a figure that can carry the blame of her disgraced family and a beaten South, Rosa creates a manipulated version of history in which defeat can be explained if not nullified. Thus, Rosa's creation and dissemination of a specific rendition of Sutpen's life aligns with Kreyling's idea of southern invention in multiple ways. With Rosa and Quentin's exchange, the text illustrates southern invention both with the textual creation of Sutpen's character through Rosa and with her expansion of that creation into a particular historical narrative or myth that works in favor of her chosen belief system.

Further illustrating Kreyling's concept of invention as it relates to southern history is the eldest Compson's version of Sutpen. Like Rosa, Grandfather Compson uses Sutpen and his story to solidify a particular southern history; however, the history assigned to him by the Compsons is a much different, though no less applicable, type of myth. Later in the novel, Quentin relates Sutpen's unusual southern origins to Shreve. Born in West Virginia, an area of a South so unspecific at the time of his birth that it does not yet possess a name—as Shreve points out, “Not in West Virginia...there wasn't any West Virginia in 1808” (179)—Sutpen's origins are far removed from the grandeur with which he eventually becomes associated:

where what few other people he knew lived in log cabins boiling with children like the one he was born in—men and grown boys who hunted or lay before the fire on the floor while the women and older girls stepped back and forth across them to reach the fire to cook, where the only

colored people were Indians and you only looked down at them over your rifle sights. (179)

As this passage makes clear, Sutpen's beginnings, according to Grandfather Compson, quite clearly reflect those of the stereotypical mountaineer's. Critics have addressed Sutpen's Appalachian heritage, though not extensively. Lynn Dickerson comments that,

[a]lthough critics have written on practically every aspect of the novel, they have said little about Sutpen's mountain heritage. This oversight has been unfortunate, for the evidence suggests that Faulkner's choice of a Southern mountaineer for the protagonist in *Absalom, Absalom!* was deliberate. (74)

"[T]he evidence" (74) that Dickerson points to are Sutpen's "fierce" (75) and "secretive" (76) nature, his extreme self-reliance (76), and his preoccupation with vengeance (77).

Critics have revised the reading of Sutpen's mountain identity to an extent since Dickerson's article, but the common consensus is that his Appalachian roots function as yet another way in which the text differentiates Sutpen from his southern contemporaries⁵. However, while critics may acknowledge Sutpen's Appalachian heritage and its ostracizing effects, the implications of the creative component underlying the eldest Compson's description of Sutpen's beginnings has been largely overlooked. In

⁵ When discussing the literary development of the Appalachian identity, Cratis D. Williams acknowledges Sutpen's "southwestern Virginia" roots and subsequently cites his ultimate destruction as evidence of "Faulkner's scorn for what he considered the most vicious variety of poor whites" (9). John C. Inscocoe asserts that, rather than appropriating the mountaineer identity negatively within his fiction, Faulkner actually aligns Sutpen's Appalachian past with an "innocence" that "[imbues] it with a moral superiority" (88) over other southern regions. However, despite his shift in critical approach, Inscocoe maintains the premise that Sutpen's heritage serves as a way to differentiate him from traditional southerners (87).

light of Kreyling's definition of southern invention, it becomes clear that the Appalachian stereotype Grandfather Compson applies to Sutpen's history is no more than another example of the human ability to impose invented constructions onto living subjects. Moreover, Grandfather Compson's decision to mythologize Sutpen's identity into a type of southern 'other' illustrates the importance of choice in the southerner's interpretation of factual events. Unlike Rosa, who uses Sutpen's story to make the unjust and illogical (to her, at least) fall of the South bearable, Grandfather Compson creates a version of Sutpen that effectively differentiates his failed idea of southernness from their own, thereby protecting a lifestyle that hinges upon beliefs uncomfortably similar to the ones from which Sutpen constructs his defeated ideal. That is, the Appalachian identity given to Sutpen allows the 'traditionally' southern Compson to conclude that Sutpen did not fail because he foolishly attempted to create a false, 'traditional' ideal: Sutpen failed because he was simply not southern enough. Thus, Grandfather Compson's depiction of Sutpen's Appalachian heritage performs more textual work than merely serving as another element of Sutpen's difference—the eldest Compson's 'authorial' choices in his creation of Sutpen's story illustrates the southern tendency to willfully invent myths and histories that serve particular purposes.

Though Sutpen's creative experience and created persona seem clear points of reference when discussing the inventive component of southern identity, Kreyling's text largely omits Sutpen's tale from his work. What likely bars this aspect of the novel from Kreyling's analysis is that, because Sutpen's character is invented from multiple and sometimes conflicting sources, readers are given a clouded and complicated rendition of

Sutpen's character. From his very entrance into Jefferson, the text makes it clear that Sutpen is not a traditional southern man:

when they saw him, on a big hard-ridden roan horse, man and beast looking as though they had been created out of thin air...face and horse that none of them had ever seen before, name that none of them had ever heard, and origin and purpose which some of them were never to learn.

(23-24)

Because of his unexplained, strange appearance and lack of an acceptable, respectable personal history, Sutpen is an outsider among Jefferson's townspeople—a label that continues to be applicable throughout his narrative life. However, despite the difference that Sutpen's ambiguous origins and persona produce, he cannot be simply classified as a non-southerner. Though it may be a South of a 'different' kind, Sutpen's Appalachian heritage produces an unchangeable connection with the South, thereby preventing him from being dismissed as a non-southerner. Thus, because his unclear relationship with the South forces him to reside in a space of extreme liminality, Sutpen embodies a problematic figure who—for the critic attempting to consider *Absalom, Absalom!* in connection to southern history—resists inclusion into a unified analysis that hinges on a figure's relationship to the South. Kreyling's analysis of the South posits an argument that becomes particularly problematic when attempting to place a character with an unclear southern identity into its structure. At the end of his introduction Kreyling defines the "side" (xviii) that his work must ultimately "come down on" (xviii) as a self-conscious manipulation of the either/or construction requiring one to relate to southern history as either a Quentin or a Shreve—a "southern defender" (4) trying to "shut Shreve

up” (4) or a non-southerner “[spouting]...stereotype, joke, and pseudo-wisdom” (4). Kreyling states, “even with the resolve to ignore Quentin and Shreve, it is next to impossible to talk about the South without them” (4).

Thus, the framework provided by Kreyling that considers the creation of southern identity largely in relation to where one falls on the spectrum of southernness makes a character with ambiguous, conflicting origins difficult to wrestle. In order to fit into the Quentin and Shreve dialectic that Kreyling uses in the construction of his analysis, Sutpen’s character must be read as either a meta-narrative detailing the vices that lead to the Old South’s demise or subtle commentary on the inaccessibility of southern culture to non-southerners. Yet, because he holds a peculiar position that both prevents him from being a traditional southerner while simultaneously aligning aspects of his identity with southern culture, Sutpen refuses to accommodate any such explication. The critical impasse, then, derives from the ambiguity of Sutpen’s origins and cultural affiliation—the narrators place him in a curious position that is neither fully outsider nor fully southern. His collection of conflicting identity markers renders it difficult, if not impossible, to decipher how ‘southern’ Sutpen is or is not, a determination that becomes vitally important when attempting to fit him into a particular southern narrative. Whether one rejects or accepts one’s regional identity, one must make a decisive claim to southernness to be reconciled to its history. Indeed, even a ‘new’ critical approach that aims to include multiple ‘Souths’ requires the individuals it analyzes to have a clear relationship to its subject matter—the liminal character, such as Thomas Sutpen, remains a figure that even inclusive models of the South cannot make room for.

While Sutpen's difficult identity perhaps provides a possible logic to Kreyling's decision to 'forget' about that experience, his dismissal or, at best, oversight of Sutpen's inventive process works against Kreyling's ethical aim of promoting a new, multi-voiced South. Indeed, the lack of critical attention Kreyling gives to Sutpen's inventive experience with the South propagates the problematic, exclusive mode of thought that a critical analysis of southern self-definition aims to avoid. Though Kreyling recalibrates the critical approach to southern identity and culture within the literature of the South by acknowledging and giving credence to dissenting, non-positivist voices, his framework does not accommodate one whose voice—like Sutpen's—speaks from an ambiguous position that rests somewhere in-between southern and not southern. Sutpen's absence from this critical conversation reifies the prejudice that one must have a particular relationship toward southernness to be qualified to speak about the culture. Kreyling's work may "resist" (xviii) and revise the single-voiced version of the South adopted by Quentin Compson (xviii) by expanding the scope of what 'counts' as southern, but his conceptual approach to southernness remains significantly similar to Quentin's. Just as Quentin strives to piece together multiple versions of Sutpen's myth-like history and invent a figure that can exist comfortably in the world of his father and the world of his roommate, Kreyling takes the invented histories of the southern thinkers that came before him and attempts to render a 'new' South. Indeed, though they may possess different ideas about what the South is, both figures allow an entity's degree of southernness to function as the defining factor that determines where such an entity fits within a southern context.

By depicting how the idyllic vision of the South cannot exist outside of the particular history that defines it, Sutpen's character and dynastic legacy illustrate Kreyling's assertion that the South as defined by popular myth is a man-manipulated invention meant to gift the region with a false sense of manifest solidarity. Though Kreyling frames the problem of southern invention within the context of literary history, whereas Faulkner approaches the idea from a fictional perspective, the intellectual leap between Faulkner's application and Kreyling's is not a long one. Kreyling simply adopts what Faulkner implies about the inventive component of southern identity and translates such implications into critical language, thereby allowing him to show how it functioned/continues to function in the invention of a distinct southern literary genre. However, the similarities between Kreyling and Faulkner's perception of southern invention stop with the admission of its problematic existence. While Kreyling asserts that the South's lack of a transcendent, manifest destiny shakes the idea of southernness at its very foundation, Faulkner makes no such claim. Though his novels suggest that he doubtless recognized the problems associated with defining the South based on an invented schema, Faulkner in no way implies that the South does not deserve defining—in fact, defining the South is concept that much of his work attempts to address; Faulkner's novels complicate a reader's ideas about southern identity and how she should relate to it, but he does not question the necessity of exploring such ideas.

Placing Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* in direct relation to Michael Kreyling's *Inventing Southern Literature* both allows these two seminal texts to relate to each other in useful ways and highlights the persistent role that the theme of southernness as human invention has played in the work of southern intellectuals. These two texts are separated

by generation and genre, but each work expresses “the experience of a constant tension between the self and history” (Kreyling 104) and attempts to come to terms with that tension. This cyclical relationship between Faulkner and Kreyling’s depictions of the southern mind speaks to the complicated nature of the South’s many attempts to situate itself within a national consciousness. As the uncertain concluding remarks of Kreyling’s scholarly work illustrate, intellectual efforts in regard to southern culture often lead thinkers back to the same questions rather than provide practical answers (Kreyling 182). However, the problematic aspects of the South by no means render it an unimportant area of study; these two authors’ efforts prove that, regardless of its questionable past and uncertain future, “[telling] about the South” (Faulkner 142) remains a goal worth pursuing.

CHAPTER 4

NEW SOUTHERN STUDIES AND POSTMODERN THEORY

Although Michael Kreyling played a pivotal role in the push to question southern identity and culture, later critics took his ideas and, with the help of postmodern theory, used them to further annihilate the idea of southern exceptionalism. One of the loudest voices in the new southern studies movement belongs to Jon Smith, author of *Finding Purple America: The South and the Future of American Cultural Studies*. In his monograph, Smith sets out to “shoot the jukebox” that creates and perpetuates the harmful southern “fantasies” (4) plaguing American cultural studies, “killing [the fantasies] off” (31), once and for all, and disavowing any lingering conceptions of distinct southern culture. To achieve his agenda, Smith equips himself with an arsenal of theoretical terms, the kryptonite of many traditionally-minded southernists. Using the ideas of a startling array of theorists, Smith moves through southern intellectual history with his theoretical guns blazing and takes aim at the southern fantasies that have haunted, confused, and troubled the minds of many. However, Smith’s act of violence on the South, it seems, is not quite violent enough. While he does a fine job using theoretical ideas to highlight and articulate the inventive elements of southern culture, his failure to extrapolate the various theories he relies upon to their logical conclusions renders his argument ultimately ineffective.

Smith’s argument that the South is a man-made invention is sound, if not mind-blowing. He illustrates that “The South” is, indeed, a fantasy of our own design, a

linguistically-determined construction that has been pieced together by those who experience it. His error lies in the selective, culture-annihilating conclusions to which he takes his evidence. He begins his narrative by boiling the South's continued existence down to the Lacanian drive for desire. He argues,

[f]rom a Lacanian perspective, we don't really derive pleasure from obtaining the object of our desire, we derive pleasure from getting all worked up about our desire, from the anxiety of not having the object...what we really like is that it makes us feel desiring, agitated, stimulated. This is what drives want: not the goal, but the endless circling thereof. (3-4).

Because of humans' desire to feel desire, we create circumstances that keep us titillated. What Smith labels the "crisis fantasy" (3) is one such circumstance, and Southern studies enacts this crisis fantasy to keep itself enticed and thus alive: "the crisis fantasy [of Southern studies] is about 'forgetting'; we are supposed to be endlessly agitated about the loss of 'memory' and hence 'identity'" (4). The result of this focus on memory results in a severe, self-inflicted case of what Smith describes as a "free-floating Lacanian drive" (31), an iteration of Žižek's "Melancholy" in which the desire for a lost, irretrievable past creates the conditions of possibility for a distinct southern identity. Southerners, Smith asserts, have mistaken an imagined lack as a literal loss and fooled themselves into believing that they exist (34). "White Southern Melancholy" (34), Smith asserts, is so pervasive that even those who claim to be progressively-minded southerners, such as Michael Kreyling and Barbara Ladd, unintentionally reinforce agrarian ideology—and thus southern essentialism—by focusing on memory and the dangers of forgetting

southern history (30). Smith charges the critics of “old southern studies” (31) with an “inability to live in present-day South” (33) and recognize that the infatuation with the “lost love object” (37) of history forces them to enact a “faked spectacle of *excessive, superfluous mourning*” (43) that mimics presence, or existence.

Smith reads Lacan’s theory onto the southern mind correctly in that its relationship with history and the past is part of what drives its existence, yet he overlooks how, while the drive sitting at the center of southern identity and culture may be “faked” (43) into being, the lost love object does, in fact, exist. It may not be physically real, but it is effectively real and influential in how humans understand the world. Lacan claims, “in the relation of the imaginary and the real, and in the constitution of the world such results from it, everything depends on the position of the subject. And the position of the subject...is essentially characterized by its place in the symbolic world, in other words the world of speech.” This passage reveals that imagined fantasy is as vital a component to the “constitution of the world” (“Freud's Papers on Technique” 80) as the real. Further, the way in which we understand the world is determined by the language we use to describe it. Humans cannot comprehend the real as it is and are forced to mediate it with language and fantasy. Lacan scholar Jacques-Alain Miller emphasizes the role of the symbolic in Lacanian thought. He states that man must “allow himself to be fooled by these signs to have a chance of getting his bearings amidst them; he must place and maintain himself in the wake of a discourse and submit to its logic—in a word, he must be its dupe (xxvii). The lost love object of the South and the desire it produces may be an imaginary fantasy created by discourse, a symbolic representation of experience with a

perhaps tenuous connection to material reality, but it is not superfluous and in need of shooting and is, in fact, foundational to humans' way of knowing.

Smith's difficulty with terms continues when he attempts to establish a dichotomy between what he describes as the "real" world and the "populist" world, a term borrowed from marketing theorist Douglass B. Holt that "come[s] to represent a particular kind of story—an *identity myth*—that their consumers use to address identity desires and anxieties...they carry a heavy symbolic load" (9). Using this theory as a foundation, Smith argues that southernist scholarship prefers to talk about the populist world rather than the "real" one in the hope—whether admittedly or no—of perpetuating imagined southern fantasies. He states,

When in 1962, at the height of the civil rights movement, Louis D. Rubin Jr., paraphrasing the Nashville agrarians, described the South as "a society...in which leisure, tradition, aesthetic and religious impulses had not been lost in the pursuit of economic gain"...he was describing not the real world but a populist one, a potent source of identity myths for a certain sort of tweedy, out-of-touch, and very white mandarin. (10)

Here, Smith suggests that focusing on a populist world of stories and symbols feeds into the "narcissistic insecurities" (16) running rampant within southern ideology in ways that attention given to the real world does not. However, Smith leaves readers wondering what, exactly, he considers as the real world. As stated previously, Smith's "real" seems to refer to reality, as in what humans *really* experience opposed to the fantasies that we construct around these experiences. Thus, the "real" world that Smith alludes to must be a place free from narrative, a space in which no individual subject participates in any type

of ideologically-charged reification of narcissistic, man-made myths. Smith argues that we must “learn to look at the world ‘in its senseless actuality’ as Žižek likes to put it...not fill it with our libidinal investments, our enjoyment” (4). To avoid such personal enjoyment, Smith intends to “keep [his] subject position unreified and in line with the argument of this book” (18-19).

Unfortunately, Smith’s intention is impossible, as there is no knowable actuality without an individual to sense it. Humans are limited by language-bound interpretation, and are thus unable to experience anything without the assistance of the discourses helping us order our worlds. To live and perceive is to interpret, disallowing any individual, even Jon Smith, to step outside of the system and deem one version of reality, or the real, more legitimate than the other. Derrida made it clear long ago that the act of interpretation is simultaneously an act of contamination, as one cannot perceive without the help of a narrative-bearing, subject-locating ideology (“Nietzsche and the Machine”). The pure subject position sitting outside of human ways of knowing that Smith’s real world requires is impossible and, like its populist counterparts, creatively imagined. At points in Smith’s narrative, he hints at a concession toward his inability to assume an objective subject position but never quite commits to the claim. He writes, “I hope to come closer to describing how most people actually construct identity” (19); and “this book seeks not to be definitive of anything (least of all “identity”) but to model an approach that might be more fruitfully applied [to southern studies]” (21). With statements such as these, Smith attempts to acknowledge the instability of subjectivity (arguably as a preemptive response to possible critique) but only backs himself into a corner, as all his semi-concessions are undergirded by a belief in his ability to occupy the

“unreified” (18) subjectivity of his choosing. He cites Judith Butler and her idea of the performative as evidence for the type of subjectivity to which he aims, but his treatment of this idea sidesteps a vital element of her theory: Butler makes it clear that subjectivity may be performed, but it is a performance in which the subject has no choice. That is, a subject is created through performance and does not exist prior to it (Butler 520). By claiming an ability to approach identity-making from an consciously assumed objective position, Smith not only suggests that he does, in fact, know what identity is but also that he understands identity-making enough to manipulate the process and subsequently bring his findings back to the masses, or “most people” (19). This assertion is not only unsupported by the theory Smith draws upon to build it but is actually counterproductive to the correction Butler’s work aims to achieve.

Along with standing upon the shoulders of a questionable theoretical framework, Smith’s notion that he can occupy an “unreified” (18) subject position that allows him to sense a reality existing outside of human involvement subtly reinscribes a claim to the essentialism he denounces. Smith makes it clear that, unlike the real world, populist worlds such as “the South” are built from a variety of pregnant, agenda-carrying stories and should therefore be dismissed in favor of the non-constructed real world. The privileging of the real over its symbolic counterpart covertly draws upon the claim to authenticity that it overtly disavows. Although Smith calls it “real” rather than “essential,” he continues to reify the belief that there must be something that supersedes human experience. The real/populist dichotomy looks quite different than the essentialist/constructivist binary of “old southern studies” (31), but it functions similarly. By assuming that he can transcend ideological reification, Smith suggests that he is in

tune with a natural humanness untouched by discourse, an “essential” identity, and can thus see the world through a clearer lens. In doing so, he performs the same cognitive move that he demonizes, instilling himself with the ability to distinguish between “fantasy” and “reality.” Smith may pose as an arbiter of truth, but he remains a myth-maker.

Further, although Smith imbues his interpretation of the South’s mournful melancholy with a sense of epiphany, this move is neither original nor an indictment that should be used so selectively against the South. Philosophers have long struggled with the roles that memory, history, and forgetting play in the knowledge production of thinking beings. Nietzsche’s work in particular plays with the concept of forgetfulness in ways that are similar to Smith’s. In Nietzsche’s “On Truth and Lies and a Nonmoral Sense” forgetfulness is posited as a vital component of truth-making.

It is only by means of forgetfulness that man can ever reach the point of fancying himself to possess a "truth" of the grade just indicated. If he will not be satisfied with truth in the form of tautology, that is to say, if he will not be content with empty husks, then he will always exchange truths for illusions...If truth alone had been the deciding factor in the genesis of language, and if the standpoint of certainty had been decisive for designations, then how could we still dare to say "the stone is hard," as if "hard" were something otherwise familiar to us, and not merely a totally subjective stimulation! (81-82)

Like Smith, Nietzsche’s work asserts that deception and forgetfulness are necessary conditions of possibility for any sort of stable, repeatable knowledge; that is, we must

forget about the lies we tell ourselves in order to exist. Smith and Nietzsche differ, however, in the scope of their conclusions—Nietzsche troubles the concept of truth and understanding, broadly construed, but does not suggest that human created knowledge is moot or ineffectual. Nietzsche asks us to rethink what constitutes truth, but he allows it to continue functioning as a formative element of human understanding. Conversely, Smith uses these ideas as grounds for destruction, claiming that the creative component of southern fantasy (he forgets that all forms of knowledge are constructed, not just those deriving from “the South”) means we should, in his language, “shoot” it.

Smith’s selective theoretical application and the faulty, agenda-serving conclusions that he thus delivers illustrate a lack of scholarly rigor that, even when read generously, delivers the killing blow to his argument. At a pivotal, defining moment in his text, Smith claims:

“the South” is, for me, a meaningless term, naming nothing but fantasies: either a great, 100-million-resident void at the heart of American studies, or a ridiculously strained attempt at identity politics as the heart of old southern studies. “Alabama” is more coherent and manageable as a site of modernity, one where the tugs of past and future, space and place, and so on mingle in very complicated ways” (22).

To Smith, then, “Alabama” is a “coherent” term and “the South” a “meaningless” one because of the “fantasies” (22) that the latter requires to operate. What he overlooks is that even his Alabama, with its manageability and complicated mingling, is in itself nothing but a construction of his own design. That is, Alabama means something to Smith because he allows it to, not because there is a “real,” touchable Alabama that exists

in the world. With this quote, Smith reveals the contradiction at the heart of his study: by resting his argument upon the proposition that the South's constructed-ness renders it a dismissible fantasy, he lays the groundwork for a discussion that, when extrapolated to its logical end, should not only prove the South as fantasy but also suggest that any form of human knowledge is also fantasy. Under the terms that Smith sets forth, that human involvement means a culture should be dismissed as illusion, then all cultures should be dismissed—if there is no South, then there is no nation, no Earth, and certainly no individual with a subjectivity that can transcend the necessity of these terms and categories that we make in the effort to know. Yet, Smith stops short of a thorough application of his theories and focuses solely on Southern culture. Smith fails in his expressed aim of bringing reality to the South and, instead, simply replaces one type of fantasy with another. Indeed, if Smith's goal is to kill the false fantasies that disguise themselves as truth, then "shooting the jukebox" is not going to do the job. Indeed, the only way for Smith to rid himself of human meddling and the populist worlds that it produces, once and for all, is to turn his weapon on himself and "shoot" the thinking subject wielding the gun.

Considering the branch of Southern studies with which Smith associates himself, his confusion blind determination to serve as a theory-wielding source of liberation for, what he considers, the field's delusion is indicative of larger, long-established tensions within Southern studies scholarship. Although Smith tries to place his argument within the larger context of American studies by claiming that "American studies and southern studies have been stuck" in similar "old forms of enjoyment" (6), the general discussion of American studies quickly gives way to a specific discourse of Southern studies. In the

introduction to Smith's monograph, Smith draws clear lines between the Southern studies that he associates with, the new southern studies (the title of the collection in which his book is published), and the "old southern studies," a group of scholars who, according to Smith, spend far more time worrying over having "Lost Something Very Important" (6) than pursuing admirable scholarship. The concluding sentence of Smith's text claims that "[cultural studies] is not a matter of choosing sides" (135), but the rest of his work deliberately differentiates the type of scholarship he participates in and the unethical and outdated methods of "old southern studies." This group of work serves as Smith's foil, the illuminating backdrop upon which to contrast his argument. Even down to the very construction of the monograph, Smith calls on the traditions or tendencies of "old southern studies" (31) scholarship to drive his argument in new directions. He states:

we have also reached the point in the opening chapter at which one is supposed to talk about oneself, to lay one's own identification cards on the table, as it were, in order to avoid the "voice from nowhere" of much twentieth-century social science...[yet] I cannot in good faith do the same. (17)

With this move, Smith positions himself within the traditional Southern studies milieu only to reject it—he uses it a means of identification by negation. Here, Smith's work performs the complicated movement between dependence and destruction that characterizes the relationship between "old" (31) and New southern studies; these branches of southernist scholarship both hate and rely upon one another.

Deleuze and Guattari's work proves useful when trying to understand the trajectory New southern studies has followed. In *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*,

Deleuze and Guattari assert that a minor literature deterritorializes a major literature by adopting the dominant language and doing something atypical with it (16). New southern studies, though not comprised of fictional works, is a body of literature and, more importantly, a body of literature that developed from a politically-charged desire to differentiate itself from the field of Southern studies at large. In this way, the new southern studies' 'minor' relationship to a 'major' counterpart allows it to deterritorialize the concept of "the South" and create a variation of what it means to think and write about it. New southern studies, then, deterritorializes the work and ideologies of their scholarly forefathers to reterritorialize and create something "new."

The desire to de/reterritorialize is, in itself, is a productive one; however, as Smith's work suggests, the particular way in which New southern studies scholars have gone about the process of de/reterritorializing the sub-field's ideology, or its BwO, is more indicative of a desire for a certain political position rather than a desire for truth; they have "[botched]" (149) the process. Historically, southern intellectual history has held a strong aversion to theory and, indeed, intellectualism in general. As Tara Powell asserts, the South has had an uncomfortable relationship with all things intellectual from its very emergence (1-2). Anne Goodwyn Jones builds upon this idea, claiming:

the absence of theory from the South has been a historical preoccupation of southerners born and trained. In the twentieth century alone, the liberal and the conservative traditions can be distinguished by their response to the absence of what has usually been called, in the discourse of southern literary criticism, not theory but "abstraction." The Agrarians in *I'll Take My Stand* believed that abstraction was a destructive, capitalist, northern

habit that derived from the cash nexus and would, if not resisted, destroy the concreteness and personalism of the South. (173)

When understanding New southern studies as a minorization process, this passage is particularly important, as it speaks to both the South's historical distaste for high-minded theoretical ideas and lays the blame for such distaste at the feet of the southern Agrarians, the men who are responsible for the push to clearly define and differentiate the South. In the political process of deterritorializing traditional Southern studies ideology, new southern studies' need to aggressively reject a distinct South via the agenda-driven use of theory indicates its desire to occupy a different ideological and political position. Put differently, though the sub-field's professed goal is to bring "reality" to the South via theoretical ideas calling the idea of stable identities into question, the scholarship it produces—work that, like Smith's, is more focused on proving the South's non-existence than using theory rigorously—suggests that the "real" goal of such scholarship is to reclaim the field in the name of a reworked ideology, one that arguably corrects the social and political missteps of its predecessors by unequivocally rejecting it. At a key point in his introduction, Smith claims that his experience working in Old Southern studies was much like being "plopped down in the midst of a community overdetermined by, fantasies, obsessions, and enthusiasms [I] not only don't share but cant in good faith ever bring [himself] to share" (6). Here, Smith hints at the hidden "libidinal impulse" driving his questionable reclamation of the South: the need to distance himself, and Southern studies, from its unquestionably horrid past. This impulse, though admirable, has produced work that is more political than scholarly and unknowingly establishes a discourse that seems very much like the evil essentialism of "old southern studies," just

placed in different terms. Effectively, new southern studies has done nothing for the study of the South but offer an alternative method of “circling” (3) around its definition. The current cultural climate of the South tells us that, despite Smith’s (and others like him) refusal to “share” the “fantasies” (6) of old southern studies (31), the effects of these fantasies are indeed “real” in that they are active, sometimes deadly, forces in the world. Telling the South it does not exist has done nothing to change it, and it is time for Southern studies to try something *really* “new.”

Despite its problematic findings, the bulk of *Finding Purple America: The South and the Future of American Cultural Studies* is a useful inquiry into the constructed-ness of identity and region. In the concluding chapter, Smith once again calls upon a form traditionally associated with southern literature—the pastoral—and provides a detailed account of his garden in Alabama:

My backyard garden is sited on the steep north slope of Red Mountain in Birmingham, Alabama, about 60 vertical feet from the ridgeline and about 250 feet above downtown. In front of our home extends a suburban landscape of half-century-old houses. There is not a front porch in my entire neighborhood; whether despite or because of this. the homes—which I might generously describe as “midcentury modern”—exude a remarkable 1950s optimism not ordinarily associated with the South, and from every window in the front of the house we can see, on a clear fall day, between five and fifteen miles. (Even in the post-bubble Los Angeles real estate market, this would be a multi-million dollar view...)...the site is

thus classically liminal, on threshold between automobile grid and curving mountainside.” (129-130)

Smith goes on to detail the specific make-up of his garden, with its exotic-to-the-South “daphnes, gardenias, camellias” (131) and its native “bougainvillea” and “Ashe’s magnolia” (131). With this description, Smith uses his garden as an analogy of the South’s constructed unoriginality; he aims to show how his southern garden is really not so southern, after all. However, aside from reinscribing a detailed attention to landscape (Smith claims his “garden labors” are not evidence of his “southern ‘sense of place’” or “attachment to the land” (131) because he includes references to suburbia, but, regardless of the intentions with which he imbues his prose, the land remains a focal point of the chapter—how southern!), the hodge-podge collection growing in Smith’s semi-southern garden actually serves as an expert illustration of the ways in which constructed gardens—or identities and cultures—are necessarily, unequivocally unique; if not for Smith’s intervention, his garden would remain a homogenous trek of “hardwood forest” (129)—it is only with Smith’s help that his backyard becomes something different, something specifically identifiable. Perhaps essentialism and uniqueness are more easily conflated when seen from a “multi-million dollar view” (129), but, from a less elevated position, it seems that all of Smith’s hard work to murder the South only makes it stronger. Guns are no match for ideology, and as long as people continue to talk about the South—even to say it is not real—the South will continue to act in the world; it will continue to exist. In the end, Smith’s violence against the South simply adds more fuel to its fire.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

New southern studies brought theory to the South, but they did so in a way that could benefit from revision. The South cannot, in fact, happen anywhere else, not because the South is special but because it is specific. Would southern literature use the same imagery, tropes, and metaphors if plantations had been built in deserts rather than swamps? If slaves were white and their owners black? Probably not. Cultures, regions, and places emerge through the material and the discursive. Language gives us the ability to name things, but there still has to be something to name. Though new southern studies aims to correct the field's tendency to, whether knowingly or otherwise, perpetuate a conception of the South that reiterates harmful ideologies, it merely leads southernists' noses ever-closer to their own bellies. Indeed, the South existing outside of discourse has been laid to rest by new southern studies scholarship, but it continues to manifest itself in powerful ways. Despite the South's critical death, it continues, effectively, to live.

To disrupt the cycle in which southern studies has found itself, critics must produce a new visioning of the South, one that takes seriously both the materials and the discursive practices that allow the South to emerge. A material-discursive rendering of the South that conceives of southern culture as the result of multiple forces, both discursive and material, coming together and effecting a mode of being, a phenomena, an assemblage that produces the specific cultures and identities associated with the American South. This conception will be an affirmative visioning that, instead of forcing

the South into an either/or configuration that sets seemingly opposing forces against one another, will construe southernness as an active, ever-emerging entity—or style—that is equally informed by the material and the discursive, the mind and the body. The theoretical framework for this re-visioning will be grounded in the work of continental philosophers whose thoughts make room for an analysis that questions the very foundation of how the knowable world is produced. More specifically, the ideas of Deleuze, Derrida, Nietzsche, and Foucault will serve as the basis for this analysis. From this foundation, the sources from which previous scholars have drawn their pictures of the South—southern literature and historical narratives—will be revisited, but with an orientation based on a material-discursive practice paradigm focusing on action and being rather than definition.

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