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## Introduction

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# Introduction

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- 1 This collection of articles provides a multi-faceted reflection on the importance of race in southern culture, past and present. It examines the topic from a great variety of perspectives, from history to anthropology through literary and film analysis. Six articles deal with the southern United States from the early nineteenth century to the present, exploring the influence of the white supremacist doctrine on southern culture through history. The seventh stands apart in dealing with the relationship between Mexico and the United States. From its radically different perspective—the North-American continent—this last article challenges the readers to broaden their view and to redefine the South as Mexico, and race as a concept based on national character rather than on skin color.
- 2 In 1928, historian Ulrich Phillips defined race as “the central theme of southern history”.<sup>1</sup> In 2001, another historian of the American South, Sheldon Hackney, observed:

To believe that there is a South and that it is based in some way on the formative power of biracialism is not to argue that all white southerners believe in white supremacy or that every African American in the South is an incipient Nat Turner. It is to maintain, however, that every white or black southerner must decide where he or she stands with regard to the tradition of black subordination. One can be a white liberal, a racial equalitarian, an unreconstructed segregationist, a leave-me-alone moderate, a black accommodationist, a black militant, or many other shades of racial consciousness. What one cannot be is nonracial. (Hackney 68)
- 3 The fact that two prominent scholars writing during two eras separated by the Civil Rights Movement and the abolition of legal segregation should point out the centrality of race in southern culture testifies to the profound influence of race on southern identity irrespective of all other factors that might have played a part in its shaping and evolution. Indeed, anyone considering the contemporary South from any perspective will soon find out that race pervades its cultural and social fabric, as scholar Joel Williamson, commenting in 1984 on the specific condition of southern women, noted: “In the South, the absoluteness of the race role plays directly into the absoluteness of the sex role and roles of good and bad” (Williamson 497). Obviously, to

single out race as the major distinctive feature of southern identity is not to deny its influence in the national experience. In the South, however, the legacy of institutionalized racism, first in the form of slavery, then in that of segregation, confers to race a specific dimension that cannot be ignored.

- 4 Until the 1960s, the vocal defense of white supremacy by southern politicians left no doubt as to the centrality of race in southern identity, in its cultural, political and social dimensions. After the abolition of the Jim Crow laws, however, this concept seemed to lose its strength in the definition of regional distinctiveness, and the very existence of a southern identity came into question as a result. Nevertheless, the connection between the South and race is still a matter of debate today. Indeed, if the South's "racial problem" was allegedly settled with the abolition of legal segregation, the concept of race remains crucial to any real understanding of the contemporary South, even if it is apprehended in new and probably more complex ways than in the past.
- 5 For a long time in American history, the reflection on race understandably focused on the South and on the effects of institutionalized racism on African Americans as embodied by the Jim Crow laws. Scholarship relied on clear North/South and black/white dichotomies which led most commentators to overlook the complexities of the issue. This tendency to oversimplification was of course favored by the white supremacist discourse which had erected a wall between the black and white worlds, not only in the concrete reality of southern society, but also in the collective imagination. Racial discourse and thought tended to pit white against black indiscriminately, opposing white racism to black victimization without probing further into the variety of experiences that individuals actually went through. Since the late twentieth century, this binary frame of thought has given way to a much more complex one, in which the definitions of blackness and whiteness have become more nuanced, recognizing the existence of many shades within each category, and shedding new light on the interaction between the two. Whereas, in the past, the reflection on race had mainly hinged on blackness, it turned in the last two decades to a more nuanced exploration of whiteness and to the subtle ways in which blackness and whiteness influence each other. This evolution is to be placed within the broader epistemological framework of the current humanities and social sciences, whose evolution has been marked by a growing emphasis on the interaction of multiple factors in social and cultural phenomena. Hence historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's observation:

Like gender and class, then, race must be seen as a social construction predicated upon the recognition of difference and signifying the simultaneous distinguishing and positioning of groups vis-à-vis one another. More than this, race is a highly contested representation of relations of power between social categories by which individuals are identified and identify themselves. (Higginbotham 253)

- 6 This new approach to race actually enables scholars to revisit American and southern racial history, as one of them, Elizabeth Hale, aptly points out in a study devoted to whiteness:

To be American is to be both black and white. Yet to be a modern American has also meant to deny this mixing, our deep biracial genesis. Racial segregation colors even our language, and thinking beyond its construction is not easy. To trace the creation of whiteness as a modern racial identity, we must leave assumed, habitual ways of racial knowing behind. (Hale 3)

- 7 In her exploration of whiteness, Hale does not conceive of separating the experiences of blacks and whites, adding: "If we cannot imagine less racially binary pasts or raceless

futures, who will (Hale 11)”? The concept of race as it is currently understood thus allows the overdue integration of racial language and thought.

- 8 Interestingly, Hale not only rejects the black/white dichotomy, but she also places her reflection in a national perspective by referring to American, rather than southern, identity, whereas her research is centered on the South—as conveyed by the title of her book, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940*. She thus clearly dismisses the traditional North/South dichotomy. This tends to demonstrate that the shift in racial thought which has occurred in the last decades has been accompanied by a shift in the ways in which scholars approach the South and its relationship to the nation. Although southern identity is still unique owing to its racial history, American identity is also presented as deeply marked by racism, so much so that the South, instead of serving as a convenient scapegoat for the conscience of the nation owing to its blatantly racist past, is now viewed as a revelator of a national disease to be eradicated by new ways of apprehending the past and the present.
- 9 The first three articles of this collection deal with the connection between South and race from a historical perspective. They demonstrate that, although race has always been an essential influence in southern society and politics, this influence has not been the same everywhere and people's ways of dealing with it have been significantly different depending on places and eras.
- 10 Michelle Brattain invites her readers to ponder over the significance of race in contemporary southern politics by discussing historians' recent reassessment of the “southern strategy” and “southern exceptionalism.” Whereas traditional scholarship accounted for the late twentieth century partisan realignment by stressing the Republicans' deliberate appeal to white southern racism in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement, recent scholarship has argued that race had been overestimated in the interpretation of the Republican ascendancy in the South. While acknowledging the strength of the latest literature on the issue, Brattain nevertheless provides convincing evidence that race was indeed a major factor in the partisan realignment that occurred in the last decades of the twentieth century, and that it continues to be a distinctive feature of southern politics which serves the interests of the national Republicans despite their claims to the contrary. She argues that even if race has disappeared from contemporary political discourse, the idea of race still pervades the language through coded words and images invariably referring to the segregationist era.
- 11 The segregated South constitutes the framework of the second article, which deals with an ill-known aspect of the school desegregation crisis triggered by the Supreme Court's *Brown* decision of 1954. By examining the collective action of white women's groups in favor of desegregation, I analyze the destructive power of racial symbols in the confrontation between segregationists and integrationists in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This article shows that racial taboos were so strong at that time that the women who worked for desegregation had to resort to a subtle strategy based on coded behavior and discourse that enabled them to undermine white supremacy without seeming to do so.
- 12 In the third article, Nathalie Dessens takes us back to early nineteenth-century New Orleans. This article confirms the recent epistemological trend toward multi-folded interpretation and the crossing of perspectives, building on the recent historiography which has questioned dichotomous readings of racial patterns and race relations in New Orleans. The author shows that the Crescent City stands both as a typical southern

city and as an exception, in the sense that race was undeniably a factor of social stratification in early American New Orleans, but that the racial pattern of the city was not based on the traditional opposition of blacks and whites but on a three-tiered division into whites, enslaved blacks, and free people of color. Moreover, due to the constant influx of Europeans and the massive arrival of Caribbean refugees at the turn of the nineteenth century, ethnic factors became as important as racial factors in the shaping of social relations, so that race relations appear to have been much more complex there than in the rest of the South. Nevertheless, race remained a major reference point in the social fabric of the city.

- 13 The next two articles explore the significance of race in southern literature in the post-Civil Rights Movement era. Like the previous pieces, they invite the readers to search for meaning beyond the simplistic patterns of black and white opposites and their moral corollaries, good and evil. In his study of Ellen Douglas's novel *Can't Quit You Baby* (1988), Jacques Pothier examines Douglas's treatment of the relationship between white housewives and their black housekeepers in the South. He analyzes more particularly how the interaction of race, gender, and class—inherited from the combined influences of white supremacy and patriarchy on which southern society was built under slavery and segregation—makes the relationship between white and black women in the South much more complex than it seems to be. The article demonstrates how Douglas reshapes the sub-genre of the *kitchen drama* by depicting her white narrator's gradual discovery of the peculiar bond that unites her to her housekeeper—a bond of which she had been unconscious because of racial conventions. Douglas thus revisits class, gender, and race by transcending literary conventions. As for Gérald Préher, he offers an innovative reading of Walker Percy's *Lancelot* (1977) by arguing that the novel does not deal primarily with the protagonist's immorality and search for sin—as most critics have claimed—but proposes a reflection on race relations in which the black character provides the white character with an opportunity for moral redemption. The article analyzes the relationship between Lancelot and his black help, Elgin, showing how Lancelot's attitude towards Elgin becomes a way for him to expiate his racial sins as a white southerner. Thus the two literary articles of this collection stress in their own ways the enduring burden of race on the southern imagination in the late twentieth century, suggesting that the abolition of segregation and the relegation of white supremacy to history did not erase the issue from the regional culture.
- 14 The persistence of race as a central feature of southern identity in the contemporary era also comes to light in Héléne Charlery's comparative analysis of two movies, Robert Mulligan's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962) and Joel Schumacher's *A Time to Kill* (1996). The article argues that, in many respects, the later movie proves more conservative than the earlier one, which can be accounted for by the political and ideological contexts in which they were produced. While both broach the issue of racism in southern society through the depiction of a white lawyer as a liberal hero in the midst of a benighted South, *A Time to Kill* extols conservative values such as masculinity and fatherhood rather than denouncing southern racism—whereas *To Kill a Mockingbird* and other 1960s and 1970s movies condemn racism unambiguously. The depiction of black characters in the later movie also conveys a conservative message about race insofar as those characters only serve to support the construction of heroic white fatherhood. Thus, unlike the two novels analyzed in the previous articles, the 1996 movie does not

emphasize white guilt but white righteousness, relegating the race issue to the background.

- 15 Finally, the last article takes us south of the border to Mexico, where “race” does not apply to skin color but to national character. In an original and engaging essay about anti-American humor in Mexico, Eve Bantman analyzes the essentialist discourse characteristic of jokes targeting the United States and its population. She shows how, by depicting Anglo-Americans as a race—designated by the term *Gringo*—such humor contributes to redefining the relationship between Mexico and the United States to the advantage of Mexicans. Although the Mexican experience bears no comparison to the racial history of the southern United States, it is interesting to note that Mexicans use the concept of race as a weapon—the “weapon of the weak”—to reverse the relationship of domination between North and South. The author argues that Mexican stereotypical representations of the *Gringo* as the Other enable Mexicans to “assert their right to exist independently” and to “reclaim their national heritage”. In that respect, the concept of race serves a function that is not fundamentally different from that defined above by Evelyn Higginbotham as “a social construction predicated upon the recognition of difference and signifying the simultaneous distinguishing and positioning of groups vis-à-vis one another”.
- 16 As this introduction indicates, our purpose here is not to offer an exhaustive study of the connection between South and race, but it is rather to invite readers to ponder over the great variety of ways in which those two themes interact. The present collection of articles attests to this variety while shedding light on striking similarities and/or elements of continuity between periods, places, and approaches.

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## NOTES

1. See Phillips in the bibliography.

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