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Just Below South: Intercultural Performance in the Caribbean and the U.S. South

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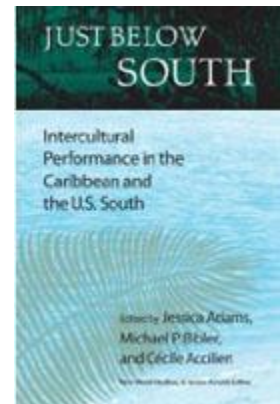
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H-NET BOOK REVIEW

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Jessica Adams, Michael P. Bibler, and Cécile Accilien,
eds. *Just Below South: Intercultural Performance in the
Caribbean and the U.S. South*. Charlottesville: University of
Virginia Press, 2007. viii + 285 pp. \$59.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-
8139-2599-8; \$22.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8139-2600-1.



Reviewed for H-Southern-Lit by James H. Watkins, Berry College

Changes in Latitudes, Changes in Attitudes

Just Below South, the latest entry in the University of Virginia Press's New World Studies series, is a substantial addition to an ongoing critical conversation that has energized U.S. southern studies in recent years. Beginning in the mid-nineties with groundbreaking works, such as Barbara Ladd's *Nationalism and the Color Line* (1996), and spurred on by international scholarly conferences; special issues in the *Mississippi Quarterly*, *American Literature*, and the *Southern Quarterly*; and a host of excellent books, such as *Look Away: The U.S. South in a Global Perspective*, coedited by Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn (2004), the global approach to the study of the literature of the South has clearly established itself as the dominant emerging trend in the field.[1] In doing so, it has been especially fruitful in deploying critical reconsiderations of various forms of U.S. nationalisms to challenge lingering assumptions of regional exceptionalism in southern studies. This ambitious, eclectic collection of essays circumnavigates a broad spatial area that extends, in the words of geographer Bonham Richardson, from "'Little Rock at the northwest corner [to] French Guiana at the southeast..., [incorporating] the eastern rim of Central America as well as the Bahamas'" (pp. 2-3). Along the way the ten critical essays in *Just Below South* trace other circular routes, beginning and ending with intercultural interrogations of canonical U.S. texts (*Uncle Tom's Cabin* [1852] and *Absalom, Absalom!* [1936], respectively) but with less familiar ports of call, ranging from translation issues in contemporary Creole Louisiana poetry to the postcolonial politics of

Trinidadian Carnival dance traditions. The breadth and range of cultures, locales, and art forms considered by the contributors is impressive.

The introduction by coeditor Jessica Adams, whose monograph *Wounds of Returning: Race, Memory, and Property on the Post-Slavery Plantation* was published last year, offers a concise introduction to the study of the U.S. South in a global perspective and a lucid rationale for the book's focus on performativity as a critical lens through which intercultural circulations between the U.S. South and the Caribbean can be explored. However, readers hoping for a comprehensive overview of the major publications in global southern studies will need to look elsewhere, since the introduction gives only glancing attention to notable contributions to the field, aside from a sustained discussion of Martinican critic, novelist, and poet Édouard Glissant's writings. Adams is most adept when discussing the book's methodological emphasis on performativity and its usefulness in linking the U.S. South to the Caribbean. While some of the essays focus on literary works and others on nondiscursive, even nonverbal, practices, she argues, they all focus on exploring material aspects of transhistorical and intergeographic relationships, the location of specific pasts and presents in human bodies and their ongoing physical consequences -- that is to say, how they are performed. And it is in the multiplicitous, decentered circulation of cultural elements that the U.S. South and the Caribbean form a regional interculture -- a space defined not so much by a shared set of geographical boundaries or by a single, common culture as by the weave of performances and identities moving across and throughout it.

Just Below South is divided into three sections. Each of the four essays in the first section, titled "Embodied Experience and Circulation of Signs," examines intersections of language, embodied subjectivity, and cultural identity in order to explore the ways in which "languages have developed within and as part of histories of contact and conflict in the New World" (p. 12). The first essay in section 1 -- and one of the strongest in the entire collection -- is Carolyn Vellenga Berman's "Impersonating the Creole: The American Family and Its Lines of Flight." Berman foregrounds the Louisiana setting of the majority of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which, she argues, Harriet Beecher Stowe used persuasively to link the impact of U.S. territorial expansionism to the growth of the interstate slave trade and to fears of insurrection. Berman is particularly effective in examining the subversive role of Legree's Creole Haitian slave, Cassy, and the diminishment of Cassy's importance in successive theatrical adaptations in the decades following the novel's publication. The second essay, translation studies specialist Anne Malena's "Louisiana's Translated Selves: The Poetry of Deborah Clifton and Sybil Klein," is commendable for its attention to two relatively

unknown contemporary poets. Malena argues convincingly that the two self-described Creole poets adroitly "exploit the complex linguistic, cultural, and racial situation of Louisiana to the fullest because they recognize the need to establish communication with the American world that surrounds them and to which they belong" (p. 51). While the remaining two essays in the first section, coeditor Cécile Accilen's "Haitian Creole in a Transnational Context" and Don E. Walicek's "Farther South: Speaking American, the Language of Migration in Samaná," will be of interest primarily to linguists rather than literary scholars, both consistently illuminate the interrelationships between language practices, cultural identity, and hemispheric politics.

Literary scholars may initially find the second section of the book, "Colonial Property, Proper Colonies, and Postcolonial Resistance," of least direct relevance to their areas of interest, since all of the essays in this section focus mainly on nondiscursive cultural forms; however, these essays offer the most provocative analyses of the creation of cultural identity through performance. In "The Allure of Origins: Neo-African Dances in the French Caribbean and the Southern United States," ethnomusicologist Julian Gerstin meticulously compares George Cable's exoticized post-Reconstruction-era account of former slaves in New Orleans's Congo Square performing the Kalenda, an African dance, to more recent, though in some ways equally romanticized, accounts in Martinican tourist literature of the Kalenda's origins. Gerstin then goes on to discuss the ways in which contemporary Martinican Kalenda revivalist organizations simultaneously resist and reenact these colonialist depictions of the dance's origins. "Trinidad Sailor Mas," by Trinidadian playwright Rawle Gibbons, examines the parodic dimensions of a Carnival dance tradition, in this case the Sailor mas, or masquerade, in which performers dressed as American sailors burlesque the foreign visitors who were ubiquitous on the island during the WWII era. Of the three essays in section 2, Kathleen Gough's "Plantation America's 'Alienated Cousins': Trinidad Carnival and Southern Civil War Reenactments" draws the clearest connections between U.S. and Caribbean cultural performances, comparing the ways in which two governmental organizations, the U.S. Civil War Centennial and Trinidad's Carnival Development Committee (both founded in 1957), each promoted spectacles that "script[ed] a story of the 'nation' that could then be performed by and for those who lived within the borders of the nations' 'imagined communities'" (p. 167).

The three essays in the book's third section, "Imagining Region and What Lies Beyond" (the only section devoted exclusively to literary texts -- all by canonical U.S. southern writers), together offer the most sustained consideration of the U.S. South and the Caribbean as a single transnational entity. In "'This Is

the Horse. Will You Ride?' Zora Neale Hurston, Erna Brodber, and Rituals of Spirit Possession," Shirley Toland-Dix analyzes Hurston's critical methodologies in her two ethnographies, *Mules and Men* (1935) and *Tell My Horse* (1938), and her memoir, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), in order to lay the groundwork for her reading of Brodber's novel *Louisiana* (1994), whose protagonist, a Depression-era American anthropologist engaging in field research in Jamaica, bears more than a passing resemblance to Hurston. Toland-Dix compares Hurston's and Brodber's shared concern with "legitimizing alternative epistemologies" through both scientific and imaginative discourse (Brodber is a sociologist as well as novelist) in order to link those concerns to an awareness and legitimation of other forms of "forbidden knowledge" (p. 195). In the case of Brodber's novel, that knowledge leads to the protagonist's discovery of the extensive transnational, circum-Caribbean appeal of Marcus Garvey's pan-Africanist movement and an increased appreciation of its relation to other modes of diasporic cultural and political resistance.

In one of the strongest essays in the collection, "Making a Real Phony: Truman Capote's Queerly Southern Regionalism in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*: A Short Novel and Three Short Stories," coeditor Michael P. Bibler offers fresh new insights into Capote's work by arguing that each of the stories in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1958) "negotiate[s] the problems of difference, identity, and classification by focusing especially on the overlapping discourses of regionality and nationality" in ways that encourage us to "rethink the structures of regional and national identities by also looking at the way Capote joins these structures to a de-essentialized model of sexual identity" (p. 212). Although Bibler offers illuminating readings of the other three stories in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, he focuses primarily on the title story and its impishly enigmatic protagonist, Holly Golightly, whose self-fashioning as cosmopolitan ingénue (which involves a brief engagement to a Brazilian playboy who aspires to the presidency of his home country) depends upon her concealment of her provincial southern rural background. Ultimately, he argues, Holly's radical indefinability exposes a broader pattern in Capote's work in which he resisted classification as both regional writer and gay writer: "With the convergence of the queer sexuality and southern regionalism at the novel's climax, we can see how both Holly and the novel exists as 'real phonies' who occupy middle categories simultaneously and imperfectly" (p. 235).

The book concludes with another illuminating reconsideration of a canonical U.S. southern text. In "Antillean Detours through the American South: Édouard Glissant's and Jamaica Kincaid's Textual Returns to William Faulkner," Jana Evans Braziel contextualizes *Absalom, Absalom!* through Glissant's reading of

that text in Faulkner, Mississippi and Kincaid's depictions of maternal affiliations in *The Autobiography of My Mother* (both published in 1996) in order to underscore the centrality of Haiti to the goings-on at Sutpen's Hundred and, through a reconsideration of Clytie's role in *Absalom*, "to shift from Faulkner's genealogical preoccupation with illegitimate sons to a consideration and reevaluation of the genealogical role of disinherited black daughters in the Americas" (p. 241).

Taken together, the essays in *Just Below South* serve as encouragement to a new generation of scholars in the field of U.S. southern studies by offering a remarkably wide range of truly interdisciplinary approaches to understanding collective and individual cultural performances in a variety of contact zones throughout the circum-Caribbean region. From the present vantage point, the trend in U.S. southern studies toward global perspectives holds the promise of a continued reassessment and expansion of the canon and sustained revitalization of critical inquiry into the commonalities of the U.S. South with other plantation cultures within and without the Western Hemisphere.

Note

[1]. See *Mississippi Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (Winter 2003/2004); *American Literature* 78, no. 4 (December 2006); *Southern Quarterly* 43, no. 4 (Summer 2006); *Southern Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (Spring 2007); and *Southern Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (Spring 2009). For additional noteworthy books in the field, see Helen Taylor, *Circling Dixie: Contemporary Southern Culture through a Transatlantic Lens* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000); Caroline Field Levander and Robert Levine, *Hemispheric American Studies* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008); and Robert Brinkmeyer, *The Fourth Ghost White Southern Writers and European Fascism, 1930-1950* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009).

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