

Southernness on Display in Recent Little Magazines

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[*The Virginia Quarterly Review*](#) 97, no. 2 (Summer 2021). Published quarterly by the Center for Media and Citizenship at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, Virginia.

I'm a fan of little, or literary, magazines. Ok, such a description may be a little disingenuous: I'm an ardent, enthusiastic supporter of this form of publishing. While the rise and continued growth of the novel might overshadow all other forms of printed literary production — the chapbook, the broadside, the pamphlet, the middlebrow magazine, alongside the little magazine — literary periodicals are venerable, exciting, and viable publications working to circulate some of the best writing one can ever find. Indeed, invoking a simple metaphor, I'll go so far as to claim that little magazines are the engine that drives the creation and re-creation of southern literature.

My current interests come in thinking about all the material which surrounds the stories, poems, art, and criticism that we find in little magazines.¹ Obviously, narratives are what we're after when beg and borrow, purchase or purloin, or do whatever it takes in order to read a literary magazine. Yet everything from a magazine's physical features and form, as well as all that information from the publisher that we find from cover to cover on a magazine probably works in ways we often consider but don't tacitly acknowledge, when we pick up the book. That splashy cover art, those letters to the editor, the advertisements we run into when we're looking for one more story to read at the back of the book, those author biographies, *all* the details from the publisher prints in the front part of the book: such information has a purpose, right? There's no point in spending money, time, labor, and other resources to get all these pieces into a magazine if they're not going to function with the magazine's readers. Thus, it's these overlapping sets of information² which intrigues me every time I sit down with a little magazine and start to read.

I have a notion — a theory perhaps, although, like all speculations, it emerged after thinking deeply about others' ideas³ — that paratext functions to produce the genre of southern literature in several ways. Such conjectures rest on the premise that we cannot wholly understand southern literature as a genre from an exclusive examination of a narrative. Instead, we properly understand the genre, or perhaps all creative

¹ For our purposes, I'm going to equate the word *magazine* with that of *book*, insofar as both forms function as published, physical objects that operate similarly when we hold and use them.

² We use the term *paratext* in literary, bibliographic, and book history studies.

³ I thoroughly address my perspectives in my forthcoming book, *Southern Fringes*.

genres, through an exploration of our encounter with narrative, paratext, and context: the joint presence of creative work informing a literary event, bound up in a specific moment where materiality and ideas intertwine with our particular reading of texts. Consequently, paratext — those bibliographic facts — play an important role in highlighting the full range of factors that makes literature possible.

We might find paratext performing several sets of actions in shaping how we realize a southern literary work. First, paratext reflects a magazine's identity. The *who*, *what*, *where*, and *when* of publishing tells us a great deal about *why* and *how* we've come to meet the magazine we hold in our hands. Akin to a social media profile, such information (hopefully) reflects a solid measure of factual information about the magazine, conveyed in a way to inform, and perhaps entice, the magazine's readers. Just like our expressions of identity, those autobiographic statements we make in public, a little magazine's autobiography rests on the synthesis of facts articulated through its creative performances, demonstrating all that the magazine is at the moment we encounter the object.

It follows that if we look at a book's autobiography, it might tell us the extent to which it considers itself publishing works we can call southern literature. Prefaces or a "Notes from the Editor" might give us insight into the volume's perspective on the works they publish. Alternatively, as readers, we may presume a little magazine publishes southern literature when we read all of this paratextual information. An easy example to think about comes in a little magazine's title. *The Southern Review* and *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, both of which we'll examine closely at in a moment, might have us thinking about southern literature before we crack the books' spines, as the words *Southern* or *Virginia* ask us to recall what we think we know about such spaces as we open the magazine's cover in search of its literature.

Second, other information in each little magazine, facts beyond those of the publisher's writing but still within their control, might do that dual work of expressing an identity and sparking interest in our minds. Cover art and advertisements might get us thinking about southern literature. Pastoral, coastal, or blue-mountain scenes on a book's cover might connect us with our imagined or real experiences in the American south. Advertisements for entities overtly expressing their brand as somehow *southern*, or when we make such cognitive or emotional connections between products and our perceived *south* work in a similar fashion. When we look at books — a regular topic in this newsletter — we find those blurbs about the book, its writer, or the writer's previous work performing work to shape our minds about the narrative we're about to read.

Third, and perhaps most easily appreciated, the presence of a writer's biography does heavy lifting in understanding the presence of southern literature in a particular issue of a magazine. Yes, we all know that conflating a writer's biography with events in a literary narrative is a misreading of literature. However, it's likely that many readers still do, because we're aware that writers follow the often-circulated aphorism, "write what you know." Even if we acknowledge the idea that fiction operates as a world unto its own, emerging from the capital letter in the narrative's first word and ending at the final punctuation in a sentence or space at the end of the last line of verse, we still might smuggle or poach ideas from a writer's autobiography into our literary interpretations.

All this is to say that a book, a magazine's, indeed any printed⁴ matter's bibliographic facts perform a variety of tasks in a myriad of forms to shape the way we might interpret the literature they serve. Take a look at any book, periodical, or other printed object that's close to you. Examine its features, not the narrative, and think about how its design and supporting materials might inform your reading of literature. You'll likely notice information that's always been there, present for all to see, but also acknowledge that you might have missed how a book's material, aesthetic, and bibliographic information might enrich your experiences in reading literature.

So let's turn to a few recent examples to see how our perspective might work in practice. Acknowledging the importance of brevity in a newsletter, a perspective I've likely already ignored to a great degree, we'll focus our attention exclusively on magazine covers. The images and words which align themselves on a book's cover hail readers to pick up the object, enticing them to hold the book, offering them an aesthetic frame from which to enter the prose and poetry contained therein. Additionally, magazine covers express facts about the publication: most frequently, title, publisher, and volume information. Such facts, especially for new readers of the periodical, likely attune us to view the publication and its literature in a certain light. We synthesize what we know in all the ways we can know — our senses, emotions, reasoning, imagination, intuition, memories, beliefs, expressing ourselves through language — with what we observe, making sense of the covers that greet us each time we pick up a book.

Doing the type of reading I'm describing means getting our hands on these works.⁵ Thankfully, I have copies of both for us to work with, so let's begin:

The Southern Review

We begin our reading of the Spring 2021 volume of *The Southern Review* on its front cover. We notice the date, "spring 2021" appearing in lowercase black letters in the upper right-hand corner. The upper-third of the magazine's front cover appears in solid white, a color choice that extends onto the volume's spine and back cover. We're greeted with the book's title, "the Southern Review," printed in a deep red serif font. Already, the word "Southern," amongst the thorniest terms in the history of American letters, asks us to consider what we think the term means and its connections to the narratives we're about to encounter. In turn, the word "Review" asks us to consider its fiction as an appraisal or evaluation of art. Thus, we might already decide that this "the Southern Review" offers us a collection of literature and criticism that's southern

⁴ Digital and audio texts, of course, are a wholly different literary form, complete with their own sets of paratext.

⁵ I encourage y'all to subscribe to either or both [The Southern Review](#) or [The Virginia Quarterly Review](#). In full disclosure, I am not an agent nor paid endorser for either publication: just a fan and a subscriber myself.

in some fashion. We need not know the publication's history, although there's plenty of information inside the volume and on the publisher's [About](#) page to give us additional context, should we so desire.

Perhaps reinforcing our perspective that the magazine offers us printed prose and poetry that's somehow southern, the line below the volume's title adds some geographic certainty to our thinking. Framed by three thin, black, parallel, horizontal lines on either side, we read "PUBLISHED QUARTERLY AT LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY," centered in the middle of the page. We need not know anything about the school, although if we do, such perceptions will aid our pending readings of the volume's prose and poetry. Drawing only from the printed line, we come to understand that this little magazine emerges from a university system located in the American south, specifically, the Pelican State. Ways of knowing specific to our life experiences interact with the words "southern" and "Louisiana," working to produce a sense of southernness for the literature we're about to read, even before we turn the page.

Below the volume's textual information, the magazine's front cover continues calling our attention, hailing us with a sparse and striking [photograph](#). A well-lit vending machine sits isolated on a dark landscape. The machine carries the red and white logo of well known soft drink company, founded in Atlanta, Georgia in the late nineteenth century. The large rectangular object sits full of products, angling its front face to our right, perhaps nodding to an assumed audience of mostly right-handed folks, suggesting that we can walk right up and reach for one of the presumably cold drinks at our leisure. Strolling to the vending machine means negotiating a mix of gravel and uncut grass, features we see dimly illuminated from the vending machine's bright lights. Such a tactile walking experience might conjure times we've stopped our car during our long trip on the Blue Ridge Parkway or some side road we're on in order to avoid I-95's dense traffic. We stretch our legs, take in the scenery, pausing for a moment's respite. Perhaps we stopped precisely because this glowing vending machine seemed so out of place. Whatever our motivations, the photograph allows us to visualize our engagement with the scene, rather than simply offering us some haphazard landscape snapshot gloss over.

Imagining our move across the ground, feeling that mix of crunch and squish below our feet, we likely gaze into the seemingly limitless expanse appearing in the photograph. Looking to the right and towards the vanishing point where the vending machine's shadow directs us towards the moment landscape and sky blend together, we spy the image of what appears to be a covered patio of sorts. Examining the cover a magnifying glass, or our best phone camera zoomed in as far as we can, the details about what sits on and next to the slab covered by a pitched roof atop four posts remains elusive. Perhaps it's a place we can walk, with our drink in our hands, to sit take cover in the heat of the day. Other objects appear ghostly in the photograph's middle ground, spectral lines and shapes which don't perfectly convey themselves or their purposes to us. Yet now, as the twilight conveyed in the photograph, the shelter seems just out of reach, slightly out of focus, and obscured in the fading light.

Extending our vision further, perhaps squinting into the photograph, we see a vast skyline in semi-gloom. A mix of darkness and clouds cover our view of the near sky, giving way to lines of Stratus clouds appearing in

the background's dying light. On the horizon, we get a sense of trees, perhaps power poles and their interconnected transmission lines, or even the flat top of a far-off building. Whatever these darkened shapes might be, we get a sense of distance from these darkened lines, shapes affirming that we're out here — somewhere — away from pavements, planned communities, and people.

We likely find reading the volume's spine if we lay the magazine flat, as it would appear on a table or desk, rather than standing it on its end were the book lining one of our bookshelves. Reading left to right, we notice the volume information printed in a thin, black font, standing at 90 degrees in our view. The orientation of this information, as well as the publisher's acronym "LSUP" towards our left, or at the bottom of the spine, might reinforce our notion that the periodical intends to be curated, collected, or otherwise displayed as books are, instead of ending up in our weekly recycling like other popular magazines. Yet it's the horizontally oriented information on the center of the spine which likely draws our gaze to its attention. We notice what seems to be the image of southern live oak, *Quercus virginiana*, holding space on the little magazine's spine. Appearing as a detailed, black and white image,⁶ the live oak's branches spread wide and tall over the illustrated ground below. We might see whiffs of Spanish moss dangling from the live oak's limbs, evoking ideas, memories, or imagined scenes we've come to know: spanning from near where the James spills into the Chesapeake, spreading southwards along the Atlantic coast and portions of its interior, across the entire southernmost peninsula of the United States and into the Gulf Coast region, extending into the Texas coast and locales deep inside the largest state in the lower forty-eight. The presence of this illustrated live oak image might do some work in hailing us to pick up the magazine on a crowded bookstore shelf. Perusing the shelves, the tree's small size and oblique orientation might cause us to pause, to ask ourselves "what is this image?" to then slide the volume from its periodical brethren and examine the latest issue in more detail. To the right of the live oak logo, we again see the volume's title, "the Southern Review," perhaps reinforcing our perception of a southern literature contained within the magazine's pages as a result of the juxtaposition of publication's title and the image of southern flora.

The magazine's back cover repeats the image from the cover, albeit offering it in a smaller version centered in the upper portion of the page. Standing by itself, we see the image disconnected from the "southern" and "Louisiana" text which might have mediated our first reading of the picture. We also continue to lack attribution for the photograph, although we will eventually come to terms with this image⁷ once we connect art to their creators. Speaking of authors: the back cover lists all of the volume's contributors in the lower portion of the back cover. We find forty-two names, ordered alphabetically, printed in a black, serif font, and separated cleanly by black dots between each name. We may know some of these folks already, or perhaps none at all, and such variances in our prior literary experiences will help up understand the tales, poems, and

⁶ We'll find a larger image of the live oak, part of *The Southern Review's* brand identity, appearing on the title page of this issue, as well as on the publisher's website.

⁷ Equally, I'll suggest we might find ourselves surprised when we read about the photo and its siblings, starting on pg. 244.

essays we're about to read. What matters here is that the magazine's cover engages us, acknowledging authors' and artists' presence in the creation of literature and visual culture. Turing our gaze towards the bottom of the cover, we find the volume's price "\$12.00US \$14.00CAN," reminding us that whatever interests we carry into our reading of writers, artists, and their respective work, doing so means treating this collection of works a commodity. We also likely notice the volume's barcode and ISSN,⁸ information which again nods us towards thinking about these narrative's places in worlds of literary circulation.

The Virginia Quarterly Review

We probably get a sense of a summer holiday when we pick up the Summer 2021 volume of *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. The magazine feels slippery in our hands, thanks in large part to the [cover's](#) glossy texture, the kind of shine and glow we might associate with a good read for the beach. Indeed the magazine's logo a bold red "VQR" printed in capital letters with white trim, seems to leap off the page much in the way modernist pulp periodicals hailed their prospective readers with flashy text spaced across their cover, even though we probably don't equate the quality of the literature we're about to enjoy in *The Virginia Quarterly Review* with pulp fictional prose. Behind the magazine's title, we find an image of a soft blue sky, illuminated by the suggestion of a rising, morning sun just beyond the horizon. The cover's photograph is a tall capture of an image of a body of water, most likely the Atlantic Ocean. We see some chop, presumably from offshore wind, disrupting the small swells which seem to be breaking towards our gaze. Given the absence of any sense of the land, we might imagine ourselves gazing into the distance from the edge of a dock, or perhaps the deck of a boat. If we've done such things in the past, we probably recall the smell of warm air passing through our nostrils and into our lungs or the sharp taste of salt upon our lips as we gaze into the distance while we can, before the intense tropical sun rises to obfuscate our view with its glare.

We speculated that the ocean image on *The Virginia Quarterly Review's* cover might reflect the Atlantic Ocean. We'd be firm in our speculations when we return to the text printed just below the volume's moniker. "Miami's Reckoning" appears in a soft purple, rounded sans serif font. Even if we've never visited the Magic City, we likely carry a host of opinions about this southernmost American metropolis — a city nestled against the Atlantic in an urban sprawl occupying much of the county's landmass — from years of exposure to popular visual, audio, and textual media which informs our complicated, imagined perspectives about Miami. The word "Reckoning" in the issue's title asks us to wrestle with its competing definitions. We might interpret the totality of the waves and water we see in the cover photo, the absence of any land mass or stable ground for us to stand on with the fate of what's to come, a reckoning for Miami, slated to be overwhelmed by the steady rise of the Atlantic Ocean. Such thinking might help us interpret the magazine's featured work, "Reimagining the Magic City: Miami's Built Environment," as well as other pieces in the volume, once we turn inside the book's glossy cover. Towards the bottom of the cove, we read the names "Terrance Hays," "Airea D.

⁸ Details about this number appears in the publisher's masthead inside the book.

Matthews," and "Elias Rodrigues" below the heading "Also Featuring." Were we to know those names, we might set our expectations of their respective work inside the volume. Otherwise, we might ask ourselves how their writing connects with the image of the water they seem to be swimming in. Whatever the case, we probably conflate images and words — the Atlantic Ocean, "Virginia," and "Miami" — in thinking that this issue of *The Virginia Quarterly Review* might present prose, verse, and artworks that reflect southernness in some fashion.

In contrast to the magazine's cover, this *The Virginia Quarterly Review's* spine offers us a dense set of printed information. Reading horizontally with the magazine lying flat on its back cover, we see both the familiar "VQR" in red with white trim, as well as the volume information printed perpendicularly so as to be best seen while the book stands upright on a shelf. Interestingly, we encounter a new title for the issue, "Miami at the Crossroads" printed in a bold black font. The change in title, where "at the Crossroads" replaces the "Reckoning" from the front cover, likely has us thinking more ominously about the choices Miamians must face; perhaps referencing those dark, churning waters on the front cover. We also find more information — "The Soul in Medicine," "Mongoose Invaders," "An Unwanted Inheritance," and "Jasper Johns" — which spread across nearly half of the spine. Looking at *The Virginia Quarterly Review's* spine, we might wonder about how these titles and names relating to Miami's "crossroads," an impeding "reckoning." Clearly, we need to enter the magazine to discover more.

Whereas *The Virginia Quarterly Review's* front cover greets us with a conflation of image and words that ask us to make connections about the literature contained therein, the back cover leans heavily on concretely communicating the volume's contents. We find the heading "IN THIS ISSUE" sitting below the magazine's later logo, printed in the white of a light turquoise field. Subheadings centered on the page and cascading downwards nearly to the bottom, broken only by a thin, white horizontal line and the imperative, "Visit us online at vqronline.com," frame our expectations of the work we're about to read. We find "Portfolios" by "Anna Maria Barry-Jester and Erika Meitner," "Elise Engler," and "Terrance Hayes," printed in a bold white font, with descriptions of their respective works, printed in a thin, regular white font, following their monikers. Under "Essays" we see "Elias Rodrigues" and "Rachel Greenwald Smith" along with brief blurbs about their writing. Barry-Jester and Meitner's work offers us their commentary "on Miami's built environment in the face of climate change," a description that reinforces the connections we might have poached from our reading of the magazine's front cover. Engler writes of "visualizing the headlines one day at a time," a description of a work we've yet to read, but might, given the other paratextual information we've encountered, relate in some ways to Miami. Similarly, we can't yet make sense of the connections between the volume's cover and Rodrigues's "on a mother's complicated homecoming" or Smith's "on compromise in lockdown," although we'd find ourselves on firm ground imagining these works having something to do with Miami or the Atlantic. In contrast, Hayes' "on a White House makeover featuring Jasper Johns" probably distances itself from the *The Virginia Quarterly Review's* title and representational southernness splashed across the front cover.

Intriguingly, the narrative explication shifts from author-centered to genre-centered towards the middle of the cover, divided for us with a bold "Plus" framed by pointed white epaulets on either side. Instead of bolded names, we now encounter "Fiction," "Poetry," a "#VQRTrueStory," "Drawing It Out," "On Becoming," "Comment," "Fine Distinctions," and "Open Letter," each with the names of those whose writing or art falls into these sections. We gain little additional information about these sections, save for the writer's names appearing in thin, white font to the right of the section titles. If nothing else, such expositions invite us to open the magazine to peruse their respective narratives.

Thinking across surfaces

We might acknowledge that we can't generalize each reading of these volumes of *The Southern Review* and *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. Indeed, each issue of the respective publication serves as a unique collection of literary and paratextual information. While some bibliographic facts — editors, staffs, places of publication and distribution — carry over from one issue to the next, cover art, literature, advertisements, and other such information change from each volume. All this is to say that claiming that "*The Southern Review* publishes southern literature* only stands up if we find support through such observations in every issue. Secondly, and relatedly, our encounters with a literary magazine reflect conditional, or perhaps contextual, moments. We don't, even if we wanted to and I'm unconvinced that anyone ever would, enter into an engagement with narrative from the same position each time we read a story. Picking up the Summer 2021 volume of *The Virginia Quarterly Review* to read Anna Maria Barry-Jester's photographs and the accompanying essay and poems by Erika Meitner in a few years time means acknowledging how we've changed, how our perspective and understanding of Miami will have changed, and perhaps how facts in the world have changed Miami.

Of course, we should also recognize that a magazine's cover, along with other features we've not explored such as advertisements, the publisher's information, writer biographical statements, and other paratext, does not overdetermine our literary interpretations. We understand that paratext serves its text, contextualizing narratives to enrich their articulation of ideas, for our reading pleasure. We might act suspiciously when encountering paratext, wrestling to undermine, or worse still, ignoring such information, but so doing, we cheapen our reading experiences. Instead, we might acknowledge that paratext plays a vital role in enhancing the literature we enjoy as well as its function in managing our literary expectations.

The combination of reliability and doubt about our interpretations need not give us anxiety. Instead, such flexibility speaks to realizing both the contingency *and* confidence we find in our humanity. Where we can find parallels, seeing how southernness manifests in different ways across the covers of little magazines, we do so only through looking closely and thinking deeply: hallmarks of sophisticated human intellect. We need not see the same south or souths on these covers, or any sense of southernness at all, although I'm hard-pressed to imagine what else might appear for readers. When we do observe southernness, it likely comes when we consider the present, visible, and discernible information that's right in front of us. Such facts and

interpretations likely mediate how we'll view the prose, poetry, and visual media we're about to read. Consequently, we should rightly acknowledge such paratextual southernness, not only because such information exists and eschewing it ignores the very nature of the literature we read, but also because doing so — affirming that our senses of southern literature rests on our admission of a joint aesthetic presence — allows us to fully realize the full range of creativity as we hold a book in our hands.

Things to think about, read, and discuss

Given these magazine's respective covers, what sorts of literature do you expect to find inside each volume? What work does such "conspicuous paratextual southernness,"⁹ found across each magazine's cover, do for the literature contained inside the respective volume? How might the southernness we see on each magazine's cover influence the way we read literature, such as the speaker in Dave Nielsen's poems "Strange Times" and "Backyard Ball" (*The Southern Review*) or Nina MacLaughlin's narrator in "The Bodies Correcting" (*The Virginia Quarterly Review*)?

Drop me a line or post a comment below. I look forward to hearing from all y'all. Link to this essay using the following DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/yyg2-t110>. [CC BY-NC-ND](#) 2021 Charlie Gleek

⁹ A term I'm remixing from Scott Romine's [ideas](#).