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U. S. Southern Cultural Studies In The Obama Era

Peter Schmidt

Swarthmore College, pschmid1@swarthmore.edu

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Review: U. S. Southern Cultural Studies in the Obama Era

Reviewed Work(s): *Disturbing Calculations: The Economics of Identity in Postcolonial Southern Literature, 1912—2002* by Melanie R. Benson; *The Real South: Southern Narrative in the Age of Cultural Reproduction* by Scott Romine

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U.S. Southern Cultural Studies in the Obama Era

by *Peter Schmidt*

Disturbing Calculations: The Economics of Identity in Postcolonial Southern Literature, 1912–2002.

By Melanie R. Benson. Athens: U of Georgia P, 2008. xi + 251 pp. \$59.95 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

The Real South: Southern Narrative in the Age of Cultural Reproduction. By Scott Romine. Baton

Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2008. xii + 284 pp. \$42.50 cloth.

The presidential election of 2008 may have signified the beginnings of a profound shift in the role that former Confederate states play in U.S. politics in the twenty-first century, four decades after Nixon's duplicitous "southern strategy" tapped white southern resentment to secure national Republican dominance. Academic cultural politics in the U.S. over the same period, at least in humanities departments, never followed so neatly negative a pattern. U.S. southern studies has played a predominately progressive role, but this has rarely been recognized by the majority of academics in the humanities. More often, southern studies has been understood to be a sideshow, a merely "regional" affair, while it is assumed that the most exciting new models for the theory and practice of progressive cultural history were generated elsewhere—in France, Germany, England (especially Birmingham), or among the transnational networks crucial to postcolonial studies, even as many foreign-born cultural studies theorists found important institutional homes in the United States. In short, for many the South hardly seems key to anything except belatedness and marginality, except perhaps if one studies the history of popular music and needs to know the blues.

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Wrong. Over the last three decades or so, occurring under the radar of many outside observers (much like grassroots organizing), U.S. southern studies has so transformed itself that it has now become of central importance to global cultural studies. This academic field doesn't merely import theoretical models generated elsewhere, it creates testable models itself. Want to learn models for discourse analysis that will work both on micro and macro levels? Add U.S. southern studies to your reading. It's a different "southern strategy," all right: you've got to include Dixie in your gaze if you don't want to be parochial and piecemeal in assessing the transnational turn contemporary cultural studies has taken. As Michael Kreyling has reminded us (and he was riffing on a long line of southern analysts, including C. Hugh Holman), what we now call the U.S. South is one of the richest sites ever discovered for investigating how a culture under stress can reinvent itself.

The creative destruction driving today's best U.S. southern cultural studies is well demonstrated by two 2008 works of literary criticism by Scott Romine and Melanie R. Benson. Published in distinguished series by well-known university presses—LSU's *Southern Literary Studies*, edited by Fred Hobson, and Georgia's *New Southern Studies*, edited by Jon Smith and Riché Richardson—these smart and wide-ranging texts should do much over the next decade or so to change syllabi across the country and to inspire new teaching strategies. The books are not without certain flaws—more on that in a moment—but their strengths so outweigh their problems that it's a pleasure to recommend them to readers of *The Southern Literary Journal*.

Begin with Melanie Benson's understanding of how capitalism and culture have long been allied contrapuntally in the South. One of the particularly sharp ironies stressed by C. Vann Woodward's histories of the New South was that when the region's ties to northern capital were re-bounded in the post-Civil War era, assertions of southern difference functioned as compensatory counter-history. Simultaneously envying and disparaging northern economic power (and the global markets to which northern capital gave the South access), southern elites created a culture of southern exceptionalism that fetishistically repeated fictions of pre-industrial memory, bonds of reciprocal obligation, and respect for proper race and class hierarchies. Building on revaluations of Freud's concepts of narcissism and the fetish by an array of theorists, Benson's original contribution is to demonstrate how southern literature in the twentieth century sought to provide fantasy-mirrors depicting both the South's sense of violation and its faith that its version of capitalism, though emergent

and incomplete, would prove far superior to the North's. Impressed by the seductive authority that quantification offered to validate value, these narratives nonetheless also express sharp ambivalence about such measurements—not least because they are haunted by the fact that “modern” scientific calculations of worth open a historical regression to the repressed calculus of slavery. In Benson's words, New South texts “register an awareness that market capitalism not only propels them rudely into a modern, imperial nation, but in fact returns them uncannily to the operations of chattel slavery and its dehumanizing mechanisms.” And this does not merely occur in stories about white planters: Benson finds similar patterns in texts by non-elite whites as well as authors of color. Following Frantz Fanon and Homi Bhabha, she configures this phenomenon as the parallel desire among the marginalized to measure and match the illusory wholeness and status of the elites who have oppressed them: they too are obsessed with quantifying success and measuring their “rise.” Yet “what postcolonialism strikingly reminds us,” Benson adds, is that “narcissism is a condition not of grandeur but of contingency and desperation,” weakness forcibly reimagined as strength. Benson's combination of psychoanalytical, economic, and historical analysis at times makes for rather heavy going, but for the most part she makes all these discourses work together. That's no mean feat.

Benson brings into sharp focus certain kinds of Faulknerian irony, particularly as figured in characters such as Roth Edmunds or Jason and Quentin Compson. “What [Faulkner] and other southern writers seem ultimately to register throughout their works is an ambivalent desire to both recuperate and renounce the contaminated social codes of plantation slavery, while bitterly critiquing the advent of a capitalist order that offers little better or different,” Benson comments. But other ironies of Faulkner's evade Benson's interpretive grid. Must we read Lucas Beauchamp's demand for a receipt at the end of *Intruder in the Dust* as merely seeking “narcissistic . . . financial verification of a balanced and closed account”? Shouldn't readers be allowed to consider an alternative interpretation of the novel's ending—that Lucas' request for a receipt mocks his lawyer while also demanding written acknowledgment of his *citizenship* rights in the public sphere, including the right to hold whites accountable for their actions? That would be a “disturbing calculation” indeed. Is Faulkner's claim that in *Intruder in the Dust* whites “owe and must pay a responsibility to the [N]egro” really just false accounting or mystification, always already reinforcing the racial hierarchies it seems to

challenge? Faulkner's late novel certainly has its flaws, but I don't think Lucas' receipt is one of them.

Benson's approach well suits figures as different as Walker Alexander Percy, whose memoir *Lanterns on the Levee* tries to cloak its contradictions under the haze of nostalgia, and James Weldon Johnson or Richard Wright. Johnson's sardonic quantifications of his protagonist's confusion over wealth and poverty in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* receive solid commentary here, but I'd particularly like to single out Benson's deftness with Wright's classic parable about guns and black manhood, "The Man Who Was Almost a Man": "the conditions that drive [the protagonist] to such rebellion also insure that he will not surmount them; Dave's folly of self-possession and pride backfire, quite literally."

Disturbing Calculations should have an immediately beneficial effect on courses teaching twentieth-century U.S. southern fiction. It will guide teachers to include new authors and ask more challenging questions. In terms of new ideas for syllabus-building, many readers will find most exciting Benson's final three chapters. Chapter Three gives welcome attention not just to Katherine Anne Porter but also to Frances Newman and Anita Loos. Chapter Four weaves contrapuntally first-rate commentary on Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Alice Walker's *Meridian*, and Walker Percy's *The Last Gentleman*. And the book's climactic chapter, "Re-membering the Missing," treats recent Native American, black, and Vietnamese American authors: Louis Owens, Marilou Awiakta, Lan Cao, James Baldwin, Toni Cade Bambara, and Tayari Jones. Rather than enforcing the illusion that merely adding new voices to a syllabus makes our representation of the contemporary South more healthily diverse, Benson encourages us to use a more complex and skeptical calculus of representation. White and black writers' "vexed ways of both remembering and forgetting Indians," for instance, "uncover the uncanny nativism still haunting the New South's struggle to come to terms with its postcolonial perforations—and not yet its repressed colonial beginnings." Like Romine's study, Benson's is invaluable for its conceptual power showing how the reproduction of community is not merely additive; it often responds to trauma and contains erasures, contradictions, and unintended consequences. For her, the narcotic of consumer capitalism almost always proves invincible, a touch as deadly as Midas's. In contrast, "[f]ueled by regional and institutional disregard, Native American and immigrant southerners offer intensified narratives of love and dispossession; yet their position on the margins . . . allows

them to uncover transnational, global echoes of the South's darkest logic." But loving what's dispossessed is not the only story Benson finds in the authors included in her final chapter. Her theoretical categories sometimes enable but at other times belie the richness of her readings.

If *Disturbing Calculations* challenges us to rethink how we define southern identity in fiction, it also inadvertently offers some cautionary tales about how not to read. Benson's most serious problem is a common one in academia, forcing evidence to fit one's thesis by slighting contrary interpretive possibilities. Benson's calculations can better measure the scathing ironies of Faulkner or Johnson (or the repressive nostalgia of W. A. Percy), for instance, than it can the profoundly riddling art of Hurston's "The Gilded Six-Bits" or Loos' comic masterpiece *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. Kudos to Benson for offering an alternative to Henry Louis Gates's easy optimism about Hurston's tale: "counterfeit gold is what buys back the couple's love, a relationship founded from the start on chunking coins and consumption." Yet her dour reading forecloses the story's scintillating ambiguities—beginning with its parody of sociology-speak in the opening sentence. When Joe places the gilded six-bits piece under his wife's pillow, is it a cynical payment for sex that boasts how they both have commodified love, *or* is it his gesture offering forgiveness, admitting that both he and his wife were fooled by the con-man Slemmons' personification of a "successful" black man? It is crucial for readers not to reach consensus too soon about whether Gates or Benson is right. Hurston's nugget of a parable is invaluable because it teaches its readers that all that glitters is not gold—and it does so in part by offering a conclusion in which Hurston does not tell us how to interpret the characters' fates. She does not negate completely the possibility that they may have learned from their mistakes. Hurston's most famous text, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* does something similar, presenting a brilliant critique of Joe Stark's commodification of collective black freedom, whereas Tea Cake—and Janey with him—finds liberation in black performance traditions that work within market-dominated spaces but are not defined by them. For Hurston, black expressive *style* may prove more subversive than striving for status, and this particular "characteristic of Negro expression" proves profoundly resistant to quantification.

Scott Romine's *The Real South* gains its considerable force showing us in often hilarious and heartbreaking detail how unreal what passes for real can be. Like much recent work in the field, *The Real South* urges that we consider how utopian narratives of the southern past drive its capitalist and social transformations rather than retard them. In contrast to

Martyn Bone's claim in *Postsouthern Sense of Place* that Scarlett O'Hara's Tara exists in parasitical and passive relation to postwar Atlanta, for instance, Romine argues instead that Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* "reproduces Tara as a site of *productive nostalgia*" that mediates and validates all the transgressions Scarlett must commit in order to prosper. Romine is not interested in assessing what's real vs. fake, but rather in tracing how individuals and groups *use* these categories, especially as depicted in literary narratives. Romine's key paradox emerges precisely here: "the real South" is not reproduced effortlessly but is invented to make rapid change *seem* seamless. "My understanding of the basic work of narrative in the age of cultural reproduction," he says, "is not as a means to weld a discontinuous reality into a coherent whole . . . but as a more contingent register of negotiating and reproducing reality's seams," i.e., those dissonant points where desire and history cannot be fully fused. For Romine, following figures such as Lukacs and Jameson, strong fictional narratives are uniquely positioned to subject utopian drives to resistance and critique, irony and parody. Romine is fully conversant with fine recent studies of elite- and mass-culture tensions as the New South shades into the "late South"—those by Michael Kreyling, Tara McPherson, Linda Williams, and Jon Smith, for instance—not to mention classic cultural studies theorists such as Adorno, Baudrillard, Deleuze and Guattari, Said, Glissant, Hall, Bhabha, and Appadurai. Romine argues persuasively that *fictional* narratives have much to teach cultural studies theory. Here he aligns himself with the literary critics who read modern U.S. southern fiction in the context of late global capitalism and its culture wars—analysts such as Helen Taylor, Patricia Yaeger, Houston Baker, Leigh Anne Duck, Martyn Bone, Sharon Monteith, Suzanne Jones, John Gruesser, and Melanie Benson.

This is not to say that *The Real South* focuses exclusively on fiction, which would exclude the book's witty and shrewd takes on the journalism of Tony Horwitz and V.S. Naipaul, the Julie Dash film *Daughters of the Dust*, the menu of Mama Dip's Kitchen in Chapel Hill, and even reasons why "themed space is the essential feature—if not the quasi-protagonist" of reality TV. But the heart of Romine's book trains its intelligence on fiction published since the civil rights movement—including Alex Haley's *Roots*, Percival Everett's *Damned if I Do*, Alice Walker's "Everyday Use," (which gets a finely calibrated reading here perfect for everyday use in the classroom), Lewis Nordan's *Wolf Whistle* (about the Emmett Till murder and aftermath), Jan Karon's Mitford novels, Bobbie Ann Mason's *Shiloh and Other Stories*, James Wilcox's Tula Springs

fiction, Padgett Powell's *Edisto*, and novels by Barry Hannah and Josephine Humphreys.

Throughout *The Real South* Romine affiliates his work with predecessors in cultural studies, but he's hardly the dutiful son repeating his ancestors' truths with variations. Here's one representative passage from Chapter Three, "Roots, Seams, and Cultural Reproduction," where Romine takes on Édouard Glissant by way of Slavoj Žižek and Stuart Hall. Romine asks how atavism might operate

among the deterritorialized spaces and consumerist practices of the late South? . . . Reading atavism and the uses of 'primordial unity' this way—and here I contest Glissant's characterization of such tactics as *retreats*; they may be advances or attacks as well—allows us to juxtapose traditions against other traditions and against their own internal logics. . . . In contrast to Allen Tate's dictum that 'tradition must . . . be automatically operative before it can be called tradition,' Žižek suggests that we call it so only *after* it ceases operating automatically. . . . A pragmatic approach to tradition, then, will avoid verifying the claims traditions make on the South, but without reading tradition itself as intrinsically fake.

That's very astute, and the book is full of such moves. Sometimes Romine's inveterate cross-referencing gets a little dizzying, as if he's compelled to show off his homework, but in general his theorists are lucidly used—and *tested*, not merely cited as oracles.

Romine's book has moments when his interpretations don't fully live up to the high standards set by his nuanced takes on theory. One representative point of trouble is his reading of Julie Dash's film *Daughters of the Dust* (1992). On the one hand, it is certainly one of the best short analyses available of the film's innovations and limitations—and at a richly packed eight pages it proves perfect for assigning to classes. For Romine, Dash persistently romanticizes Gullah culture: "the film's visual register eliminates all traces of degradation and deprivation." Yet Romine also shows how Gullah identity in *Daughters of the Dust* faces multiple threats, from rape to Christianity to commodity capitalism. Its response is to make identity dependent not upon territory but upon shared cultural practices that access deep ancestral time while still engaging with the demands of the present. These technologies of memory include both the ancient, such as Nana's fetish objects, and the modern, such as Mr. Snead's and Dash's cameras separately discovering the inspiring presence of Eula Peasant's unborn child. Possessing cultural

literacy with all of these memory-modes, the film suggests, will better prepare the Peazants for moving into modern American space off the island without losing their bearings or their African cultural heritage. All trauma in the film, Romine stresses, is worked through “*collectively* in order to ensure genealogical continuity”: “In recuperating dispersal as diaspora, the film mobilizes a transportable ideal of primordial unity, an imagined return to African roots synchronized with an actual migration in the opposite direction—toward the mainland and North.”

On the other hand, Romine’s commentary flattens out Dash’s emphatic emphasis on the *diversity*—not “primordial unity”—of the “African” in Gullah culture, not to mention the many varieties of being “African American” personified by the Peazants. Each Peazant enacts the genealogy of his or her cultural inheritance in a profoundly individualized way; it’s hardly just collective. For example, the unborn child touches a Sears Roebuck catalog with a finger dyed in indigo—signifying the connection between African cloth-dyeing technologies and one source of wealth for the Sea Islands Gullah, not just an industrial capitalist dream-world that will soon engulf them. Nana’s fetish bag is hardly relegated to being a relic “of a bygone and increasingly *useless* past”; Romine is misled by some characters’ occasional joking about Nana’s attachment to it. In the climactic final scene a fetish of Nana’s *is tied on top of the Bible* that the Peazants heading north must kiss and carry with them, a memory-carrier as portable and protective as a turtle’s shell. Like that assemblage, Dash’s cultural genealogy for the “African American” is profoundly heterogeneous and layered, neither unitary nor atavistic. Romine’s Dash discussion reveals a problem that surfaces occasionally in his book: Romine’s commentary sometimes proves more adept at demystifying narratives of homecoming and collectivity than it is at decoding how cultural syncretism in the late South need not be merely homogenizing, but can instead become a narrative means for acknowledging difference (as the Peazants learn to do). Romine’s goal here and throughout *The Real South* nevertheless remains profoundly right: to trace how (in Bhabha’s words) our constructions of “the real” also “reinscribe the past, reactivate it, relocate it, *resignify* it.”

During the 2008 presidential election, of course, the South did some pretty deep resignifying of its own regarding calculating “red” and “blue” states. Accompanying this shift both before and after election day were debates about which voters represented “authentic” southerners versus *manqué* and *arriviste* ones. (The French have always had the best resentful words for tagging inauthenticity, though southerners

play this game pretty well themselves.) If one analyzes a county-by-county map of 2008 national voting patterns, a new picture of the un-solid South instantly emerges. A long swatch of counties stretching from white-dominated rural Arkansas and Louisiana up through the hill country of Mississippi and Alabama and Kentucky and Tennessee on into mountainous West Virginia and Pennsylvania counties became sharply redder in 2008, all voting Republican in even higher numbers than they provided George W. Bush in 2000 and 2004. *That* South is aligning with nationwide forces to portray the federal government as an invading colonial tyrant, while depicting itself—shades of the “Redeemer” South of the 1880s and the “States’ Rights” South of the 1960s—not as angry white entitlement but as Revolutionary freedom reasserted. It remains to be seen whether Obama truly initiates a new era or proves a casualty of these political temblors. Like a tectonic plate, that “red” South is grinding against or moving away from at least several other Souths that can’t be mapped very accurately by the old racial or class or regional divisions. Among the virtues of both Benson’s and Romine’s genealogies of twentieth-century southern identities is their charting of how collective *cultural* as well as political narratives may be contested and reconfigured. Those old southern utopias are not ours, we say; let’s build a different one. Yet it is Benson’s and Romine’s ability to cast a cold eye on such rhetoric that we should most welcome. These studies should have an immediate impact, adding new texts to our courses that “tell about the South”—and offering new ways of questioning our canonical texts as well. Perhaps their most invigorating impact will come if teachers encourage their students to challenge Benson’s and Romine’s readings, rather than merely adopting them.