

## Race and Memory in Southern Fiction

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**On the cover:** Carla Carlson, *Regret*. Acrylic, Conte and pastel  
on canvas 4' x 3', 2004. [carla.carlson@usm.edu]

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## Editor's Introduction

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Douglas B. Chambers

As we send this the maiden issue of our new editorial staff to press, we are all still reeling from the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Even in Hattiesburg, some seventy-five miles from the Gulf Coast, the devastation was immense. Things have been patched back together, if provisionally, though as I write this my own house is still without gas, phone and cable service, and the roof sports three squares of blue tarp until repairs can be made. But in this heat I will gladly trade cold AC for hot showers! And the birds are back; brown thrashers and finches, mockingbirds and hummingbirds, woodpeckers and cardinals. The University of Southern Mississippi is up and running, at least in Hattiesburg, classes are being taught, and we are picking up the many threads of our personal and professional lives. Crisis outs character, and through the remarkable commitment of our editorial staff, especially our managing editor Ann Branton and her colleagues in Cook Library, we have completed this special issue on Race and Memory in Southern Fiction within our original deadline.

In this issue we present a series of papers previously submitted, all of them 'over the transom'. Christopher De Santis reckons with William Faulkner's ambivalence about race and African Americans in his writings about Reconstruction. How did Faulkner see the legacy of Reconstruction? John Hodges wrestles with the legacy of another iconic Mississippi writer, William Alexander Percy, but from a personal perspective; sons of the same county, one was born white and rich and the other black and poor. How does one reconcile the tangled memories of a certain place and time? Alison Graham-Bertolini shifts our focus on race to poor whites in the Florida panhandle, the Crackers of Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings' fiction, to remind that people discover the manifold humanity of others through simple acts such as reading a postcard to an anxious illiterate woman. Anna Shannon Elfenbein brings us to the present through the recent novels of Anne Tyler, seeing in her contemporary work a dramatic shift in the ways that Tyler presents black people (and of course white people) in her fictional worlds. Sally Wolff King rounds out the issue with a conversation with Bishop Duncan Gray and his memories of William Faulkner *the man*, which brings our issue back

full circle. And, continuing a tradition in *The Southern Quarterly* dating back to 1989, Judith Bonner contributed part seventeen of her ongoing bibliographic effort documenting the visual arts and architecture in the South. We hope and pray that her institution, The Historic New Orleans Collection, where she serves as senior curator, escaped the worst of the damage in the Crescent City. Lastly, given the way that the tragic unfolding of events since August 29<sup>th</sup> in our region of the country so quickly became racialized and marked by indelible images of desperation and violence, and I am thinking here of the Superdome in New Orleans, Julia Armstrong's review essay on lynching studies reminds us that the burdens of Southern history must continue to "be confronted precisely because it reveals the unfathomable worst alongside a few highlights of good."

Over the past fortnight as I have imagined both the worst and the good in my mind's eye, largely isolated from national media and relying on local radio and rumor and even at times innuendo to get by, and seeing both the good and the bad up close and personal, the voices of the storm crowding in when it was 85 degrees at midnight and no one could sleep, the smell of death in the air and no one to rely on but ourselves, I found myself thinking of lines from Stanley Kunitz's "Remembrance: 'The Layers'" (1985), here in part:

I have walked through many  
     lives,  
 some of them my own,  
 and I am not who I was,  
 though some principle of  
     being  
 abides, from which I  
     struggle  
 not to stray.  
 When I look behind,  
 as I am compelled to look  
 before I can gather strength  
 to proceed on my journey,  
 I see the milestones  
     dwindling  
 toward the horizon  
 and the slow fires trailing  
 from the abandoned

campsites,  
over which scavenger  
    angels  
wheel on heavy wings.  
Oh, I have made myself a  
    tribe  
out of my true affections,  
and my tribe is scattered!  
How shall the heart be  
    reconciled  
to its feast of losses?  
In a rising wind  
the manic dust of my  
    friends,  
those who fell along the way,  
bitterly stings my face.  
Yet I turn, I turn,  
exulting somewhat,  
with my will intact to go  
wherever I need to go,  
and every stone on the road  
precious to me.  
In my darkest night,  
when the moon was covered  
and I roamed through  
    wreckage,  
a nimbus-clouded voice  
directed me:  
“Live in the layers,  
not on the litter.”