Editor's Introduction

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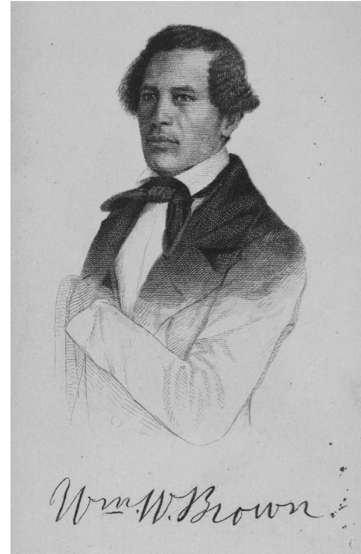
The current issue is a personal and professional reflection of the South as home. As a native of Gainesville, Alabama (just two hours north of Hattiesburg, Mississippi on I-59), I was raised in a small rural town that still preserves signs of its antebellum past in white and gray marble. Large estates with columned porches and "hidden" gravesites are just a few of the monuments to the Confederacy that symbolize Gainesville's historical significance (it was incorporated around 1832) as a river town on the bluff of the Tombigbee. I should mention that this local history is *lost* to most of the residents in this now predominately black town. Only reminders of economic prosperity (likely based on slavery) that survived the Civil War linger. The curious cultural anthropologist in me – even as a child – wonders then about the owners (past and present) of the pristine antebellum homes and Confederate soldiers buried just a short distance from my Head Start school building? Most perplexing is where are the monuments to the African Americans (*and* Native Americans) who also once lived there? After all, it is their black descendants who survive today.

Though I became an English professor instead of an anthropologist, I am still driven to excavate early African American cultural contributions to the South. Literary scholars such as William L. Andrews and Frances Smith Foster helped to make this field (and my career) possible considering the scope of their research of African American writers in the nineteenth century. In this special issue of *The Southern Quarterly*, the contributors extend the conversation about "my southern home" by examining the experiences of African Americans, either as slaves or free people, who considered the South their home throughout the nineteenth century despite the social conflicts they might have encountered while living in the region. It features those African Americans who, as *southerners*, wrote about matters of race and region in their fiction, poetry, plays, letters, speeches, essays, and autobiographies. This issue concentrates on definitions of southernness that contest an imagined, pure antebellum southern culture as well as a constructed, white hegemonic post-bellum southern identity in the absence of blackness.

To provide a survey of the literary lives of black southerners during this period, we begin with Ben Schiller as he presents slave epistles as crucial documents for cultural historians and literary critics alike. These examples of slave correspondences with their masters show how important critical literacy was for a disempowered class. Schiller's essay serves as an interesting counterpoint for discussing the development of African

American literature that essentially centers on narratives written by former slaves. It is important to understand how enslaved blacks also sought ways of engaging in epistolary, public discourse, "though frequently coded and covert," as another way to resist bondage while remaining in the South. Even when escape was the most appealing option, southern black slaves maintained a sense of place as Harriet Jacobs (1813-1897) claimed Edenton, North Carolina. Anne Bradford Warner explains just how Jacobs constructs a different southern home than that which appears in other slave narratives influenced by northern abolitionists: in Edenton, there was a "southern, African American folk community … organized, functional, and rich with its own cultural legacies and traditions."[1]

Writing about his native South, William Wells Brown's life and literature inspired this themed-issue. Brown (1814-1884) led a very active public life as an abolitionist and prolific writer. His autobiography, *Narrative of William Wells Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Written By Himself* (1847), was the first of his numerous books of history, fiction, and travel writing. His novel, *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter* (1854) is considered the first novel by an African American, which he revised and published several editions. Jennifer Schell discusses how Brown alters his version of the South by performing "its landscapes, its demography, its histories, its laws, its people" for various audiences. This subversive intent undermines the stability of regional identity. Brown's experience as a playwright and actor also enables him to give a convincing performance of southern life and culture. Furthermore, his experiences in the South authenticate his fiction. John Ernest finds Brown's lasting impressions of the region mapped accordingly in *My Southern Home: Or, The South and Its People* (1880). This multi-genre book (combination of drama, fiction, and autobiography) is Brown's final publication which draws attention to "a region that was itself a complex of mythological and ideological (mis)representations." Together, Ernest and Schell present William Wells Brown as a black Southerner with a distinct sense of "place."



William Wells Brown (1814-1884) Preprinted with permission. New York Public Library, The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York City, New York.

Similarly, Frances Harper's (1825-1911) southern identity is defined by an ability to traverse boundaries drawn by racial politics. Leaving the

North in the late 1860s, she toured the South just as Brown did during the Reconstruction era. Hers was a journey of a southern exile returning home too. Harper's southernness is discernable, I argue, if we consider the ways in which she deconstructs the South to reveal its inherent racial paradoxes: white and black Southerners lay claim to the region because they are bonded by communal relations though in opposition to one another and, in turn, each creating their own southern ethnicity. Like Harper, Ida B. Wells-Barnett (1862-1931) would become a southern "exile by law" when the social climate of racial violence escalated in her hometown of Memphis, Tennessee. She nevertheless remained self-identified as a Southerner when she worked within the region (throughout the nation and beyond) to affect social change. Rychetta Watkins revives Wells-Barnett's revolutionary activism to overturn a southern system of racial violence, discrimination, and segregation. Watkins traces Wells-Barnett's developing "revolutionary consciousness, her commitment to militant praxis to resist the existing social order, and her advocacy of revolutionary principles of self-determination and self-protection to secure the safety and viability of the black community in the region."

Themes of resistance by southern black women like Jacobs, Harper, and Wells-Barnett are shared in Anna Julia Cooper's radical critique of racial, gender, and regional positionality. As Vivian M. May argues, Cooper (1858-1964) refused to be narrowly defined by others' perceptions of her. The labeling of her stance as a "Black Woman of the South" signifies a "nuanced and complex political and theoretical standpoint that is fundamentally matric and intersectional." May forcefully asserts, as does Cooper, that "the lived experience of marginality [as a woman, black, and southern] lends access to knowledge not readily available to those positioned at a culture's center." In other words, we may recognize patriarchal whiteness as "southern" but what about the subaltern voice of a black woman (or black Southerners in general)? How enriched our cultural awareness of the South becomes when we focus on what May calls "the politics of location" – identification in non-exclusive terms – and what I consider to be the legitimate efforts of black Southerners to redefine their historical displacement in regional narratives. Thus, this issue concludes with Gabriel A. Briggs' look at an oft-neglected writer-activist, Sutton E. Griggs' literary campaign to solve the "race problem" in the South and America at large. By re-interpreting "New Negroes" as a generation of African Americans determined to modify repressive social systems at "home," Briggs make clear that the South was not a place too threatening for black sustainability and progress. When southern blacks witnessed the reassertion of white hegemony in the "unreconstructed" South, writers like Sutton E. Griggs (1872-1933) responded as sociologists concerned about the fate of the race. As a colleague and close friend

reminds me, Griggs imagined a place and role for blacks in a *reconstructed* South (a South rehabilitated from the wounds of the Civil War), even as they dealt with the social, economic, and political chaos of the war's aftermath. The forging of this resolute communal identity suggests the profound effect that racism had on the literary imaginations of African Americans trying to survive at "the nadir."

Collectively, these essays present reasons why and how nineteenth-century southern black writers position themselves in a chaotic historical period that not only threatened their lives at times but also undermined their ability to identify with Southernness, a group affiliation whose importance we have not yet recognized. As Southerners, they wrote against racial injustices while exposing the potential erasure of their cultural identities. Scholars interested in revisionist social history recognize and interrogate the "white South," legally sanctioned by political and economic powers since slavery. This constructed Southernness does not take into account how blacks in *and* of the South can claim the region as their home too. One justification, offered by sociologist Carol Stack, that explains why urban blacks migrated back to the rural South in the late twentieth century is useful to understand why many of their ancestors remained in the region at all: "the image of home is multilayered" for them. I believe, as Stack concludes, that black Southerners now and then "set about appropriating local time and memory and blood and symbols for intimate community purposes on their own" (1996: xv). Likewise, white Americans – especially Southerners, must also first acknowledge and then work to resolve internalized racial trauma produced by the grounds of difference in the South (Hale 1998: 281-282). With both groups, such psychological scars give new meaning to the "deep" South.

This issue was created with these haunting thoughts of home in mind. Before the essays were selected though, I discovered an image of a story-quilt by Harriet Powers (1837-1910) that depicts biblical scenes in appliqué designs. Only two of her quilts remain today, both in prestigious museum collections at the Smithsonian Institute and the Museum of Fine Art in Boston; the latter was chosen as the cover image. Powers was born a slave in Athens, Georgia and created her quilts likely as "visual teaching tools" though she was probably illiterate. Yet, her artwork survives to tell "*her*story" and, as I like to think, that of other nineteenth-century black Southerners too. While she did not put pen to paper, Powers used her imagination to create and interpret her Bible quilts for a captivated audience. The record of her life and artistry frames that of the southern black writers profiled in this special issue of *The Southern Quarterly*. That their legacy continues is evident in Natasha Trethewey's 2007 Pulitzer Prize-winning poetry collection *Native Guard*. I close then with a series of her reflective tributes to the South:

> The road going home was pocked with holes,
> That home-going road's always full of holes;
> Though we slow down, time's wheel still rolls.
>
> – "Graveyard Blues" (ll.10-12)[1]

NOTES

[1.] Anthony E. Kaye's *Joining Places: Slave Neighborhoods in the Old South* (2007) explains circumstances that helped to create a supportive network of slave communities which Jacobs and others would identify as "home."

[2.] Natasha Trethewey. *Native Guard* (2007: 10-12).

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