
Editors' Introduction

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In this general issue, co-edited with Martina Sciolino, associate professor of English here at Southern Miss, we offer an alternative consideration of that venerable theme in Southern arts and letters: the intersection of nostalgia, identity and place. The very centrality of nostalgia, and its obverse (anti- or counter-nostalgia), suggests the significance of change over time, as what is nostalgic is *past*, whether real or conjured, selectively reconfigured for the *present*. Ironically, perhaps, to be a Southerner is also to be rooted in a changing time – and to its inevitable march. Certainly it is also to be rooted in place, or at the least in a “place.” But these essays also challenge us to consider how various southern “pasts,” whether in terms of building styles or literature or popular music, can variously be represented and/or deployed for a variety of cultural ends, including toward a yet newer South.

In the twentieth century, even more than in the nineteenth, the Civil War was elevated to a kind of *eminence gris* of southern-ness. Still today it is the most written-about aspect of southern history, a fixture of the popular imagination.¹ And the icons of the War, from the battle-sites as ‘sites of memory’ to the wielding of the battle flag as a cultural weapon, even if in decline, are still potent symbols of a peculiar kind of regionalism, a stubborn pride in a narrative of loss.

But the centrality of secession and failed war, and, the necessity of reference to an Old South of slavery and honor and paternalism as forever definitive of “the South,” obscures what happened later. For it was the very success of *both* the reestablishment of white supremacy *and* its eventual overthrow since “the woawa” that created a new and quite different South: anti-nostalgic, modernizing, adrift, in search of itself, getting by as catch can, looking desperately forward even as the past beckons, strangely seductive, viciously destructive, redemptive in its suffering. In times of dramatic change and flux, of course, people can respond in fundamentally conservative ways to advance the status quo, as did antebellum slaveholders in Charleston, for example, who appropriated a nostalgic form of architecture, the gothic, to make concrete their emergent pro-slavery ideology, when it started to matter. Clifton Ellis and Gina Haney explain how Charlestonians reworked their urban space to communicate the rootedness of slavery, or at least the rooted-

ness of the paternalist ideal of slavery; medieval architecture reforged as coercive text.

At about the same time, the 1830s and 1840s, someone like Edgar Allan Poe, a consummate Southerner of his generation, at least of a certain *enfant terrible* sort, rather avoided the rural genteel for the bustling world of town. His life and still-mysterious death – considered in a novel way by Robert Hopkins, who himself did not live to see this essay published – were emblematic of a kind of generative antebellum southern gothic, a whiskey-tipped personal tragedy, a homeric chimæra, first denied and then underscored as object lesson for several generations by any number of public figures.

Lauren S. Cardon sees that epitome of southern nostalgia, *Gone With the Wind*, as containing a covert narrative of anti-nostalgic diversity, at least among the white characters – people *became* white, *became* masters, *became* Southerners. And Maureen McKnight utilizes Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* specifically to offer a rethinking of nostalgia itself – as discerning useable pasts woven not from stories of collective loss but out of personal triumph, in this case of a black, female protagonist. Wendy Pearce Miller sees a similar kind of 'protest' in Elizabeth Madox Roberts' story of hardscrabble po' whites, struggling on the underside of the emergent twentieth-century new South. And Alex Link, regarding a story that turns on an ill-fated road-trip past Stone Mountain, that Mount Rushmore of the Lost Cause, pauses to consider how at mid-century southern space and place was being sanitized, satirized, and sterilized, and where nostalgia confronted the creative destruction of modern capitalism and a sanitized, mass produced South. Shawn E. Miller then examines *Bastard out of Carolina* as a "survivor's tale," a quest for self-knowledge in a violent social landscape of dislocation, of loss of place and identity, of exile.

We close with two contributions, reversing time and order. Kate Greene suggests that southern misfits today, such as the Georgia-bred Indigo Girls (folk-rock band), evoke a useable nostalgia to self-consciously *choose* a southern identity, one that flows from a stubborn love of place – not amnesiac but forgiving, not sanitized but sane. There certainly is, and most certainly always was, a counter-history, a counter-myth, assertions of belonging based not on blind fidelity to any Lost Cause but to the possibility of redemptive change, to seeing and saving what is best in being southern and jettisoning the rest.² In Daniel Cross Turner's essay on Andrew Hudgins' iconoclastic and epic prose-poem *After the Lost*

War, a tour de force of *counternostalgia*, we come full circle. Hudgins' work seeks to demolish once and for all the pious sanctity, the supposed sacredness, of the Civil War, to recast the memorialized battlefields themselves as dystopias, as "spaces of otherness."

And why not? The cultural reproduction of a Civil War-centric South and its aftermaths, essentially white, male, violent and racist – if teary when a little beer-y, and perversely loyal to a made-up time and place – seems increasingly inauthentic. Hudgins' poetry expresses anger that we must still constantly, if maybe only implicitly, answer to a past as much wicked as anything else.

But perhaps, in our rush to condemn, to revise, to *exorcise*, the southern past, or some such parts of it that offend, we forget the good stuff. The searing heat of summer, the constant threat of thunderstorms and the flash-floods they bring, some spinning off tornadoes, drawing in hurricanes, or, the dust-choked devastation of drought and pine-soaked wildfires in what are still some of the poorest parts of this country just cannot, in the end, compete with peaches and honeysuckle, with backyard barbeques and blackberries and the bounty of a land where all you have to do is plant something green side up and it will (usually) thrive, sometimes despite all odds. To the eternal question, even in this age of universal air-conditioning, of "Hot enough for you?," we can only answer "No."

The Old South died long ago – and so has the New South and its uncritical nostalgia. Or has it? Not long ago, one of our students from Alabama told me of her brother, still in high school, who was looking forward to getting his first tattoo – a Confederate flag on his shoulder. She asked me what I thought of that, and I told her, "Well, tell him that your professor, who has tattoos as well by the way, says, in this day and age, 'don't be a dumbass'." We laughed, and he probably got that tattoo, contrarian rebel that he apparently was.

Even at the height of twentieth-century southern nostalgia, as evoked in that iconic poem, "Ode to the Confederate Dead" (1926), Allan Tate (1899-1979), a writer in exile if ever there was one, could not help but strike a discordant note:

Turn your eyes to the immoderate past,
Turn to the inscrutable infantry rising
Demons out of the earth – they will not last.

Stonewall, Stonewall, and the sunken fields of hemp,
Shiloh, Antietam, Malvern Hill, Bull Run.
Lost in that orient of the thick and fast
You will curse the setting sun.³

NOTES

¹A subject also approached as a form of literary/critical studies, as in Stephen Cushman's memoir *cum* cultural criticism on the Wilderness battle (May 1864), *Bloody Promenade: Reflections on a Civil War Battle* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999).

²See for a general example, John Egerton, *Speak Now Against The Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); or, for an example from Mississippi state politics, the collected writings of a progressive former governor, William F. Winter, *The Measure Of Our Days: Writings of William F. Winter* (Oxford, MS: William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation, University of Mississippi, 2006).

³*Selected Poems* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937). Tate, though born in Kentucky, educated at Vanderbilt, and part of the mid-century literary Fugitive and Agrarian movements, actually spent the balance of his adult life outside of the South.