

## Race and the Multiple Souths in the Long Nineteenth Century: An Introduction

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A location, a myth, a direction, a state of mind, the “South” has multiple meanings, each of them relational rather than fixed. The essays that make up this special issue, written by scholars based on both sides of the Atlantic, grapple with American Souths, European Souths, and speculative Souths. They do so, moreover, in connection with another term that has neither a single nor a static definition, namely “race.”

Born in Alabama and raised in Massachusetts and thus a frequent traveler between the U.S. North and the U.S. South, Imani Perry believes the latter region has been grossly mischaracterized as “somehow out-of-step and behind the rest of the country—this sort of other, strange place. That perception is a way to make the South the scapegoat for the nation’s sins or vulnerabilities” (Balch 2022). As she contends in her National Book Award-winning *South to America: A Journey below the Mason-Dixon to Understand the Soul of the Nation* (2022),

Paying attention to the South—its past, its dance, its present, its threatening future, and most of all how it moves the rest of the country about—allows us to understand much more about our nation, and about how our people, land, and commerce work in relation to one another, often cruelly, and about how our tastes and ways flow from our habits. (Perry 2022, 12)

Approaching the U.S. South as an imagined community with various meanings in different geographical areas and historical periods, this special issue explores the racialized and gendered

representations that emerge from a multiplicity of literary works by American writers of African descent during the long nineteenth century.

The focus on the long nineteenth century aims to foreground narratives, interpretive traditions, and theorizations that have tended to result in stereotyped and often derogatory definitions of the South. Both before and after the Civil War, the South, in its various iterations (as slave, segregated, silent, rural), has served as a foil to the supposedly free, modern, progressive, urban North. That this is a misleading binary opposition is a foundational contention of the present special issue, as it underplays anti-Black discriminatory practices in the North and diminishes the vibrancy of the cultural and political activism of African Americans in and from the South even in the most oppressive historical circumstances. The essays in this issue cover different historical periods, from slavery to the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction eras to the first decades of the twentieth century, focusing on the central role of the South in the imagination of African American writers, as well as in the aesthetically and historically specific strategies they devised and deployed in order to challenge their literary and social marginalization and oppression.

Questioning the familiar contrastive North v. South binary entails problematizing the long-standing sectional hierarchies that have influenced the interpretation and canonization of African American literature in ways that are still operative in the twenty-first century. The opposition between the literary cultures before and during the Harlem Renaissance is a case in point, exemplifying the geopolitical subtext that has informed literary critical evaluations. In *The New Negro* (1925), Alain Locke hailed the mass migration of African Americans from the South to the North as “a deliberate flight not only from countryside to city, but from medieval America to modern” (6) and contrasted the Old Negro, who saw “himself in the distorted perspective of a social problem” and was burdened by a “psychology of imitation and implied inferiority,” with the “New Negro,” who was “achieving something like a spiritual emancipation” characterized by “renewed self-respect and self-dependence” (4). While it should be noted that, as Jeffrey Stewart demonstrates in his award-winning biography, Locke’s respect for and understanding of the past were more complex and nuanced than such statements would seem to warrant, nevertheless the value-laden connotations of “new” vs. “old” have resulted in a long-standing history of critical underestimation and scholarly neglect of pre-Harlem Renaissance literary authors.<sup>1</sup>

During the past fifty years, thanks in part to the archival turn in the humanities, this critical neglect has come under critical scrutiny, resulting in an intense activity of rediscovery, reprinting, digitization, and reinterpretation of long nineteenth-century texts that have complicated and enriched the understanding of pre-Harlem Renaissance African American literature.<sup>2</sup> In her groundbreaking volume *To Make Negro Literature: Writing, Literary Practice, and African*

*American Authorship* (2021), Elizabeth McHenry honors and builds on this scholarship, arguing that “the last years of the nineteenth century and the opening decade of the twentieth” (6) represent a crucial period that saw the articulation of the “practical and conceptual frameworks for African American literature and the transmission of literary culture” (11). Significantly, she pays specific attention to the South, acknowledging that it has “proved far more difficult to illuminate print and literary cultures across” that region (15) than in the urban North. For this reason, she focuses on books that were “sold by subscription throughout the South and the Midwest,” because they provide a “lens through which to see a readership that literary history does not yet adequately recognize” (14).

Contributing to this ongoing critical project, the essays in this special issue foreground the centrality of the South in African American literature of the long nineteenth century. They highlight, first, how the authors under consideration challenged complacent notions of its ‘peculiar’ otherness and presented the region as a mirror and a metonym for both the ills and the potentialities of the entire nation; and, second, how they envisioned the South as the starting point from which to articulate a project for a more egalitarian polity and move beyond the confines of the nation by adopting the U.S. South as a critical paradigm to interrogate racist discourses embedded in sectional divisions and transnational hierarchies. These writers insightfully addressed such concerns with courage, first-hand knowledge, a profound appreciation for the power of the written word, and a studied approach to the literary craft, as evidenced by their intertextual engagement with works from various literary traditions and their subversive reworkings of literary genres.

The essays in this special issue showcase the generic, thematic, and aesthetic variety of African American literary representations of the South. They focus on a diverse range of authors and texts: widely canonized literary artists such as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, William Wells Brown, Frances E. W. Harper, and Pauline E. Hopkins; politically engaged authors based in the South such as Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Sutton E. Griggs; neglected figures such as Mary Etta Spencer; and lesser-known texts by major writers, such as Charles Chesnut’s *The Wife of His Youth* and Booker T. Washington’s *The Man Farthest Down*. The essays examine the multiple Souths these authors portrayed in their works, demonstrating how misleading hierarchical and binary definitions of the North and the South can be, and expanding and complicating our understanding of African American literature of the long nineteenth century.

Setting the tone for the entire issue, in “Displacement and Indirection: Prism Life in the Antebellum South,” John R. Ernest examines the South prior to the Civil War as a palimpsestic and complex creation grounded in competing experiential, ideological, and literary narratives.

Ernest contrasts the multiple efforts by antebellum white writers to transform the brutal institution of slavery into a “great, ordering abstraction” with the works of African American authors who had to escape from the South in order to write about it. Adopting “fugitive rhetorical performances” that manipulated literary and social conventions, Black writers challenged dominant interpretations of slavery and foregrounded the effects of the peculiar institution on slaveholders themselves. Offering a wealth of literary references to illuminate the “contending forces of dueling texts,” Ernest provocatively and convincingly argues that “the quintessential works of the antebellum South were those written by Black writers,” who knew its contradictions firsthand and were not saddled, as white southern authors were, with the impossible task of defending, explaining, and justifying slavery “in service of a coherent regional identity.” Understanding the prism of slavery, “the various ways their voices would be deflected and refracted, their experiences misrepresented, their views discounted,” African American writers would “become the most authentic voices of the South.”

Moving to the post-bellum period, in “Resisting an Inglorious Forgetting: *Imperium in Imperio*’s Speculative Recollection in an Amnestic Nation’s Persistent Old South,” Courtney Novosat examines “the rhetorical hydra of post-Civil War reconciliation narratives.” Through a carefully contextualized analysis, Novosat analyzes the competing representations of the South, and by extension of the future of the nation, that emerge from three works of speculative fiction published during the last five years of the nineteenth century: W. H. Bishop’s *The Garden of Eden USA, A Very Possible Story* (1895), Frank Purdy Williams’s *Hallie Marshall, A True Daughter of the South* (1900), and Sutton E. Griggs’s *Imperium in Imperio* (1899). Against the background of the segregationist utopias set in a romanticized South by northern authors like Bishop and Purdy, Novosat highlights how in his first novel Griggs exposed the “evolving rhetoric of white supremacy” undergirding the revisionist erasure of Black contributions to the nation in popular fictions, as well as in the 1893 Chicago and 1895 Atlanta world’s fairs. Novosat shows how in *Imperium in Imperio* Griggs uses a counterfactual “world’s fair as the site of armed Black secession” in order to expose how such events functioned as sites of white supremacist “miseducat[ion] on an international scale.” Novosat’s closing comments hail Griggs’s interventions in his time as relevant to our own, as “revisionist control over the national historical narrative” remains contentious.

In “Blood at the Root: Ida B. Wells and Pauline Hopkins’s Gothic Souths,” Marco Petrelli continues the exploration of African American counter-discursive responses to conditions in the post-Reconstruction South by focusing on how Ida B. Wells and Pauline E. Hopkins adopted gothic narrative strategies to dismantle romanticized and pastoral white supremacist literary representations of the region. Drawing on the scholarship of Maisha Wester, H. L. Malchow, and Teresa Goddu, Petrelli explores the intersections between Wells’ journalistic exposés *Southern*

*Horrors* and *The Red Record* and Hopkins's novel *Contending Forces*. He foregrounds how they deployed "gothic and horrific imagery to render racist violence hyper-visible and raise awareness of the terrifying scale of white terrorism." In revealing the southern myth of civility to be barbarism and the southern myth of purity to be violence through "hauntings, grotesques spectacles, and scenes of horror," Wells and Hopkins, Petrelli argues, reconfigured the gothic by "shifting horror and monstrosity from the racialized Other onto the society that produces and enacts them." In doing so, they transformed the gothic into "a rhetoric of denunciation, a structure of memory, and ultimately a vehicle for social mobilization and redress."

In "Charles Chesnutt's *The Wife of His Youth*: Satire and Passing in the American South," April Logan also examines Southern mythologies. She addresses the critical neglect of Chesnutt's short story collection *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line* (1899), published the same year as his highly lauded story cycle *The Conjure Woman*. Focusing on "The Passing of Grandison," Logan shows that Chesnutt "parodies plantation fiction to satirize the racial politics of Americans who were complicit in post-Reconstruction erasure of slavery's national legacy." Chesnutt highlights that U.S. anxiety about formerly enslaved African Americans symbolizes the complexity of efforts to unify the nation through regionalist narratives. Through the archive, Logan discovers that in "The Passing of Grandison" and its *Puck* magazine prototype "Appreciation" (1887) Chesnutt argues that anti-Black racism in America defies regional as well as socio-economic boundaries. Logan analyzes Chesnutt's lampooning of Euro Americans' anti-Black racism and Americans of African descent's internalization of it across the U.S. She reveals that "Chesnutt critiques the phenomenon of racial passing as a strategy for combatting racial ignorance and bigotry." Chesnutt turns to satire in "The Passing of Grandison" to provide a counter narrative to popular but destructive Southern histories and remedy the cultural alienation of biracial and African Americans.

The "South" as a socio-economic and ideological construct is at the center of Michel Huisseune's essay, "Comparing the European and the U.S. South in Booker T. Washington's *The Man Farthest Down*." Huisseune focuses on the strategic implications of Washington's definition of the South in his 1912 book about his six-week trip in 1910 to the United Kingdom, Sicily, Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Denmark. For Washington, the European South comprises not only Southern Italy but also regions like Poland and Bohemia that are situated in Central Europe. Washington's definition of the European South is less geographic than socio-economic, since it comprises "less economically developed areas where agriculture remains the main activity." Starting from an overview of scholarly reevaluations of the importance and theoretical complexity of this understudied text, Huisseune illuminates how Washington deploys the comparison

between ethnic minorities in the European South and African Americans in the U.S. South to question racist discourses, rebut stereotypes, and foreground the impact of both governmental policies and bottom-up forms of uplift on class and racial hierarchies. Huysseune examines unexpected moments in the text and shows how Washington deployed the comparison between the U.S. and European Souths to support “more militant forms of collective action, such as strikes,” and to emphasize the importance of acquiring political rights.

The closing essay, M. Giulia Fabi’s “Southern Trajectories in Black Feminist Speculative Fiction: Mary Etta Spencer’s *The Resentment*,” participates in the ongoing reconstruction of the genealogy of African American literature by focusing on a 1921 novel that, despite its republication in 1996, was “not lost, [...] but disregarded” by scholars (McHenry 13). Fabi reexamines the significance of *The Resentment* through a close reading that situates it within a tradition both of early twentieth-century African American novels centered in the South and of nineteenth-century Black feminist speculative fiction. Reading beyond the pronounced visibility of the African American hero’s rags-to-riches cover story set in the South, Fabi analyzes Spencer’s intertextual revisions of Harper’s *Iola Leroy; Or, Shadows Uplifted* (1892). She foregrounds the parallel, innovative woman-centered plot that questions traditional gender roles, culminates in the articulation of “a collective utopian space for Black women,” and features a southern Black heroine who is a professional nurse and community leader. Fabi argues that the novel’s “ideal economy of reciprocity and mutual support obtains in terms of sexuality” as well. Spencer participates in discourses on reproductive rights and family planning, challenging “assumptions about African American women writers’ reticence about issues of sexuality” and stimulating renewed scholarly attention to the present-day relevance of “Old Negro” literature of the long nineteenth century.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Stewart underlines how Locke was aware that “the New Negro was part of a hidden cultural tradition in the folk heritage of Negroes” (2018, 510).

<sup>2</sup> Likely inspired by novelist Sutton E. Griggs, whose 1899 Southern-based definition of the New Negro in *Imperium in Imperio* has long been known to critics, scholars such as Gabriel A. Briggs, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Gene A. Jarrett, and Martha H. Patterson have traced the trope of the New Negro in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literary and cultural materials published long before Locke’s canon-making use of the phrase.

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