

Fall 2007

Review of Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn, eds., Look Away! The U.S. South in New World Studies.

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Recommended Citation

Adams, Jessica (2007). Review of "Review of Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn, eds., Look Away! The U.S. South in New World Studies.," *Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature*: Vol. 6 : No. 2
Available at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrc/vol6/iss2/8>

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Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn, eds., *Look Away! The U.S. South in New World Studies*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004. xi-xii + 521 pp. ISBN 0822333163 (paper).

Reviewed by Jessica Adams

In brightly colored relief at the apex of the county courthouse in Newberry, South Carolina, an uprooted palmetto, the state symbol, appears suspended by a white cord from the beak of an eagle. Perched upon the tree's roots, a game cock; in its branches, a dove. South Carolina, the first state to secede, is reconstructed but also "redeemed" in this iconography. (The southern Redeemers attempted, successfully, to re-establish white supremacy in the political and cultural life of the south by overthrowing the forces of Reconstruction during the late 1860s and 1870s.) As the cock weighs down the roots of the tree and the dove balances unsteadily above it, the conflict between southern difference and national interests remains vivid and unresolved.

The relationship of "America" to "the south" is the subject of *Look Away!*, a collection of essays edited by Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn. The editors and contributors aim to move beyond the tendency to equate "the United States" with "America," and conventional thinking about the south itself. *Look Away!* represents a reaction against the general impulse, both popular and scholarly, to associate the south with Confederate memorabilia and plantation nostalgia, lost causes and rural values. It rethinks the image of the south presented in foundational works of southern studies like *I'll Take My Stand* (1930), by Twelve southerners, including John Crowe Ransom, Stark Young, and Robert Penn Warren, and W. J. Cash's *The Mind of the South* (1941). Although the focus in these two works on "the southerner" as a white man obviously limits their currency, Smith and Cohn are particularly concerned with refuting such southern texts' arguments for the south's uniqueness within the nation. Instead, they direct our gaze outward into the larger region of the Americas, illuminating the south not so much as a place apart from national norms in the United States, but as part of a larger, international region shaped by the experiences of colonialism and slavery. Reintegrating the south into theories of the New World, Smith and Cohn cast off tired stereotypes of southern difference as source of regional pride and national fascination mingled with alarm (think *Dukes of Hazzard*), and instead foreground longstanding cultural relationships between the south and the Caribbean and Latin America that have been obscured by the production of national narratives.

Our ability to view the south in active relationship to regions separated from it by national boundaries, but joined to it by common histories, has been enabled in part by Antonio Benítez-Rojo's concept of a "repeating island," which reveals deep social and cultural similarities among islands that, despite their differences, have been equally shaped by plantation slavery. Examining Caribbean literature and cultural performance in his book, titled *The Repeating Island*, Benítez-Rojo argues that the character of the heterogeneous Caribbean has been profoundly influenced by the common experience of the "plantation machine," an infrastructure established by the region's colonizers to maximize their profits. This system has produced, however, and continues to produce not only profits but a way of life. It generates both physical spaces and "the type of society that results from their use and abuse" (8-9). Smith and Cohn note, "It should not surprise us that each of the ten 'innumerable conflicts' Benítez-Rojo claims are found in Caribbean literature also forms the central conflict of at least one major work of U.S. southern literature by such writers as G. W. Cable, Charles Chesnutt, William Faulkner, and Alice Walker" (7). They

also draw inspiration from Patricia Yaeger's reading, in her book, *Dirt and Desire*, of "gargantuan, monstrosities, throwaway or disappeared bodies, repressed trauma, landscapes of melancholy, even literal dirt eating" in southern women's writing, which they note appear as well "in major texts by male and female Caribbean and Spanish writers such as Isabel Allende, Edwidge Danticat, Gabriel García Márquez, Jamaica Kincaid, Christina Peri Rossi, and Marta Traba" (7).

The book is organized into four sections: "The U.S. South and the Caribbean," "Rethinking Race and Region," "William Faulkner and Latin America," and "From Plantation to Hacienda: Greater Mexico and the U.S. South," each of which focuses on literary works -- or, in the case of Kristin Silva Gruez's "Delta *Desterrados*: Antebellum New Orleans and New World Print Culture," on another kind of written text, daily newspapers. There is one exception to this concentration on linguistic expressions of inter-regional American studies, Jane Landers's "Slave Resistance on the Southeastern Frontier: Fugitives, Maroons, and Banditti in the Age of Revolution." Landers, who has done other fascinating work on colonial Florida, here provides a "survey of ... some of the more well-known examples" of "slave resistance" (90) during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries in the "tri-racial" (black, white, and Hispanic) southeastern U.S. She notes that "[s]laves became adept at interpreting political events and manipulated them, when possible, to achieve freedom. The initiative and action of the slaves -- their acts of resistance, flight, *cimarronaje* (creating fugitive communities in remote areas), and social banditry -- also shaped the course of international, as well as local responses" (80). Exciting possibilities for further research, she suggests, lie in new analyses of primary materials in English and first readings of primary texts in Spanish as well as in the realms of material culture and oral history (90).

Despite its focus on literature, *Look Away!* also seems to be part of an emerging critical trend indebted to Paul Gilroy's theory of the Black Atlantic, a transnational region defined by the "triangular trade of sugar, slaves, and capital" (157), and Joseph Roach's circum-Atlantic, which considers intercultural performance and interracial encounters along the Atlantic rim, among places and cultures -- mainly New Orleans and London -- that continue to be marked by the complicated aftermath of the continuous movement of people, commodities, and people as commodities during colonialism and slavery. Gilroy's and Roach's interdisciplinary, cross-cultural approaches have provided models for renewed thinking about the U.S. south and the south's relation to the rest of the New World. Although the theoretical focus on the transmission of culture through performance integral to both *The Black Atlantic* (1993) and *Cities of the Dead* (1996) is for the most part absent from the essays in *Look Away!*, Gilroy's and Roach's general influence, while unstated in the collection itself, has helped to create a context for the kind of inter-regional thinking that the editors of *Look Away!* aim to generate.

From my perspective, the essays that most effectively further the project of the volume are those in which the authors illuminate material links between writers and cultural phenomena or address texts that incorporate and address relationships among people and issues in what we might call the New World south. These include Jesse Alemán's reading of the possibly fictionalized autobiography of a Cuban woman, Loreta Janeta Velazquez, published in 1876, which describes Velazquez's experience fighting, in drag, for the Confederacy. Alemán argues that Velazquez's "purported Cuban identity is a historically performed construct that, on the one hand, challenges the idea of essential ethnic identity and, on the other, imagines an ideologically authentic

connection between Cuba and the Confederacy during the nineteenth century" (112). Leigh Anne Duck's treatment of the Trinidadian V.S. Naipaul's descriptions of his travels through the southern states in *A Turn in the South* (1989) critiques, among other things, Naipaul's "fascination with the figure of the redneck" (151). Duck considers his growing awareness of the connections between his life in Trinidad and life in the U. S. south, both cultures and economies shaped by plantation slavery. However, as she argues, Naipaul's fixation on redneck culture

allows him to ignore the southern history of oppression and division; though he acknowledges that the poor of both races suffered during slavery and in its aftermath, he is concerned here only with those aspects of the past that the redneck is said still to inhabit. Imagining life in an ungoverned and unstructured frontier, existing before the development of plantations, he is able to forget "that difficulty about the cause" [that is, the Confederate cause] that emerged in previous discussions with white southerners, as well as the differences in feeling and in interpretation that prevented the past from serving as a unifying principle in southern identity. (167)

In his analysis of the novel, *Who Would Have Thought It?* (1872), by a little-known nineteenth-century Mexican writer, María Amparo Ruiz de Burton, John-Michael Rivera argues that the transformations of the main character in this novel, a Mexican woman, "[complicate] the geopolitical binaries associated with the Civil War (black/white, southern/northern) and reveal the extent to which the geographic and racial identities of the inhabitants of Greater Mexico were important to the capitalist expansion and national identity of the United States" (452). As Rivera goes on to point out, "[i]n a Greater Mexican formulation of the Americas, the investigation of the U.S. 'south' in cultural and literary studies is not only a domestic inquiry into the Civil War, slavery, white women's suffrage, and African American rights, but also a transnational study of the often overlooked but entirely related geopolitical relationship that the United States has with Mexico and its inhabitants" (454). This is very interesting work that, in concrete ways, helps to expand the way we conceptualize southern (and national) culture and history.

Academic study of the south has, indeed, been ripe for renewal. Writers like Katherine Anne Porter, Arna Bontemps, and Zora Neale Hurston long ago became fascinated by places farther south (Mexico, Haiti, and Haiti and Jamaica respectively), but critics have taken what we now might call a more traditional view. Tradition here means something like "heritage" in the slogan, "Heritage Not Hate," a claim for the political legitimacy of Confederate flags in the twenty-first century that appears on bumper stickers. Tradition, that is, has signaled the implication, the assumption, that "southerners" are white (as Yaeger reminds us in *Dirt and Desire*). "Traditionally," southern literature has meant writing by white people, while black southerners are seen as speaking more for race than for region. And "tradition" invokes the history of the south as defined by defeat and nostalgia. The idea that the south is different from the rest of the nation because of its association with slavery has resulted, in part, in the academic marginalization of southern literature and culture, though by the mid-nineteenth century slavery had touched virtually every state and territory in the Union, as historian Quintard Taylor points out in his book, *In Search of the Racial Frontier* (75).

Smith and Cohn may help to change the preconception that studies of the south have narrow application as they illuminate the south's porousness, and the relevance of the plantation to the

life of the New World. The plantation, they write, is "the New World paradigm rather than the exception within American exceptionalism" (15). And they work to expand the critical vocabulary of studies of the larger plantation region by examining the south through the lens of postcolonial theory. "What happens ... if we look away from the North in constructing narratives of southern identity?" they ask. "[I]f we define 'America' hemispherically, for example, the experience of defeat, occupation, and reconstruction -- particularly if this historical trauma is broadened to include the African American experience of defeat after slavery -- is something the south shares with every other part of America" (2). "Defeat" here is not simply Lee's surrender at Appomattox, but "the south's continuing experience of New World plantation colonialism, a system that, both before and after the war, most benefited white men in distant metropolises (something often complained of in white southern discourse) and most burdened black southerners (something almost never complained of in white southern discourse)" (2). The editors argue that it is possible to see the U.S. south as postcolonial space without buying into the ideologies of the forces that opposed Reconstruction, and those that are still angry about "northern aggression."

The image of Confederate flags flying across the south today intrudes on my consciousness. Where is the "post" in this postcolonial? The notion that the south has definitively moved past some colonial period associated with the Civil War and into an identifiable "afterward" does not seem to accurately reflect the nuances of culture and society in "postcolonial" places. Smith and Cohn acknowledge the term's inadequacy, citing Ella Shohat's comment that "'post-colonial' would be more precise ... if articulated as 'post-First/Third Worlds theory' or 'post anti-colonial critique', as a movement beyond a relatively binaristic, fixed and stable mapping of power relations between 'colonizer/colonized' and 'center/periphery'." Based on this redefinition, the editors argue, "the U.S. south represents an ideal field for such study" (10). But we might also interpret this comment to mean that "postcolonial" simply fails to represent its intended subject. Reading the U.S. south as postcolonial also tends to obscure the rapprochement that developed between north and south soon after the end of Reconstruction (and even before the end of Reconstruction) -- the collaboration between whites from both regions in the invention of the south as a site of romance and nostalgia. The plots of popular novels published during this time that hinged upon marriages between a northern man (sometimes a Civil War soldier) and a southern belle make the point explicitly. As David Blight's and Nina Silber's work illuminates (in their books, *Race and Reunion* and *The Romance of Reunion*, respectively), the mythology of the Lost Cause, the melancholy reimagining of defeat around the turn of the nineteenth century, was not produced by southerners alone. As Blight notes, for example, in the early 1900s the United Daughters of the Confederacy, based in Georgia, received paeans to the Klan from the nation's western frontier (289-90).

Smith and Cohn acknowledge that viewing the U.S. south as postcolonial requires us to view white southerners as colonizers in their own right vis-à-vis black southerners. (Again, what is "southern"? A regional designation? A racial or emotional one? Were slaves "southerners"? Certainly not according to most masters. And at what point have blacks in the south become unequivocally *postcolonial*?) But the volume as a whole attends for the most part to the cultures of the relatively privileged (which is not to say "white"), from literate Spanish-speakers in nineteenth-century New Orleans to the work of Martinican Creole theorist and novelist Edouard Glissant to exiled Cuban critic/autobiographer Gustavo Perez-Firmat to white supremacist

Thomas Nelson Page's novel, *Red Rock* (1898), and Thomas Dixon's *The Leopard's Spots* (1902). In this sense, although they ground their approach in the centrality of the plantation regime in the New World, *Look Away!* differs from the work of Gilroy and Roach, for whom black cultures are central. Although Landers's essay looks at the development of black and Native American opposition to the plantation regime in Florida and Richard King writes about the work of Richard Wright, including his account of his African travels in *Black Power* (1954), these are the only contributions to address black southern cultures in a collection comprising no fewer than twenty-one essays, confirming the editors' note that work in the field they are helping to create has only begun.

Smith and Cohn do point to several tantalizing topics that they acknowledge *Look Away!* does not address but should, some of which would help repair this balance: the place of Native Americans within the rubric of the postcolonial south, "the U.S. South's *northern* 'border'" (14), "Katherine Anne Porter's and Cormac McCarthy's treatments of the complex intersections between the South, Texas, and Mexico" (14), and Zora Neale Hurston's account of her travels in Haiti and Jamaica in her 1935 ethnography, *Tell My Horse*. Others might include Arna Bontemps's novel, *Drums at Dusk*, set in Haiti on the eve of the Revolution; the life and death of exiled Haitian revolutionary leader Georges Biassou in St. Augustine, Florida (which Landers has written about elsewhere); and the resettlement of Loyalist planters from the southern states in the Bahamas after the Revolutionary War. Yet the collection contains eight essays on the most widely studied white southern author, William Faulkner -- nine including Ilan Stavans's "Posdata," or postscript, entitled "Beyond Translation: Jorge Luis Borges Revamps William Faulkner" an analysis of, in part, Borges's translation of Faulkner's novel, *The Wild Palms*, (though admittedly, Stavans seems more interested in Borges than in Faulkner). Faulkner also features somewhat prominently in J. Michael Dash's essay on Edouard Glissant; Glissant was fascinated by Faulkner's work, and wrote a book-length analysis of his work, entitled *Faulkner, Mississippi* (first published in French in 1996). Faulkner's influence on Latin American literature is certainly worth noting in the context of a collection addressing the New World south, and he did have an at least briefly expressed interest in connections between the U.S. south and the Caribbean, evident in *Absalom, Absalom!*, as well as an interest in works written in Spanish-speaking regions of the New World. (Helen Oakley writes in her essay in this collection that, after a 1954 visit to a writer's conference in São Paulo, Faulkner "announced that he intended to study Hispanic literature and make a return visit" [406].) But considering the vast possibilities inherent in the book's subtitle, this representation of Faulkner seems disproportional. For me, the greatest value of *Look Away!* lies in its insistence that "the south" is central to American Studies, "New World Studies," Comparative Literature, and English; that the stigma associated with studying southern literature is hopelessly antiquated. I don't want to understate the value of Smith and Cohn's detailed and theoretically sophisticated treatment of these issues. The volume's focus on Faulkner thus seems even more unfortunate, for Faulkner has, since the mid-twentieth century, been recognized as an "American" rather than a specifically "southern" author, and he has been so widely written about that it hardly seems necessary to feature him in nearly half of the essays included in the volume.

Despite the glut of essays about Faulkner, however, Helen Oakley's "William Faulkner and the Cold War: The Politics of Cultural Marketing" is a welcome addition. Oakley writes, "Critics have argued persuasively that Faulkner's modernist techniques helped Latin American writers to

break away from constricting Spanish models and that his southern context reflected their own shared sense of historical defeat and racial conflict" (403) -- but the story is not so simple. She shows how "[t]he resurrection of Faulkner's reputation within the United States in the late 1940s and 1950s caused a radical domino effect that precipitated his rise to international fame," a development which "caused the concept of 'Faulkner' to be exported to Latin America as a cultural commodity." Faulkner was not simply "discovered" by Latin American writers (410); instead, his work was promoted in part by the U. S. government, which viewed him as a useful vehicle through which to promote American values (a highly ironic development, considering his subject matter) (407).

Regardless of the issues that one wishes this volume had explored more fully, in helping to expand the ways we think about the U.S. south, and about the relationships that underlie and belie the development of New World nations, Smith and Cohn and the contributors to *Look Away!* have done southernists and Americanists (in the broadest sense of the word) an important service. Tracing spheres of influence radiating from nodes in the network of New World cultures allows us to see more deeply, more *interestingly*, into the past, into the densely layered ways of being that these histories have created.

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