

NEW DIRECTIONS IN SOUTHERN STUDIES

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# Southscapes

GEOGRAPHIES OF RACE, REGION,  
& LITERATURE

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contemporaneity, of making sense of the swirling maelstrom of contemporary life," so that postmodern thought may be seen as "a long overdue reassertion of the significance of space in social thought," perhaps even a "postmodern hyperspace," as Michael J. Dear suggests in representing the postmodern as "a stretching and reorganization of society's time-space fabric into dimensions we can so far only dimly perceive."<sup>32</sup> Dear, in his focus on the spatial, also echoes bell hooks and others in his finding that "the radical opening made possible by postmodernism is both invigorating and exasperating" because it has "legitimized a wide variety of different voices" even while calling attention to the increasing atomization of spaces.

Literary scholars now frequently align space with the production of narrative in postmodern discourse. Brian Jarvis, in *Postmodern Cartographies*, suggests from his examination of American fiction that geography itself is infused with narrative: "Given the structural inseparability of space/place/landscape and social relations there can be no geographical knowledge without historical narrative. In other words, all spaces contain stories and must be recognized as the site of an ongoing struggle over meaning and value."<sup>33</sup> Approaching space as a site of struggle over value and meaning necessarily involves engagement with the structures underpinning and driving narration itself. In positing narration alongside space in postmodern studies, Patricia Yaeger raises a series of interconnected issues:

If ordinary space can be scripted as heterogeneous and multidimensional, refusing the simplicity of linear narrative, if local politics can be concealed or immersed in tropes of tragedy and romance . . . space has an additional political-psychological dimension. The physical world is also a site where unrequited desires, bizarre ideologies, and hidden productivities are encrypted, so that any narration of space must confront the dilemma of geographic enigmas head on, including the enigma of what gets forgotten or hidden, or lost in the comforts of ordinary space.<sup>34</sup>

Because the forgotten or the hidden, repressed, or disguised in narrative all too often will turn on issues of power, *Southscapes* utilizes this theorizing about postmodernism and narrative to explore the shifting sites of power in contemporary Deep South texts.

*Southscapes* is, in the sense of a space of possibility to articulate differences in the South's "time-space fabric," a mapping of modernity and postmodernity in the geographies of race and region. The very concepts of homelessness and alienation and uprootedness, for example, are standpoints and take their meanings against the backdrop of space and the relationship of the body to

space. While homelessness, alienation, and uprootedness, so much a part of the modern ethos, may assume profoundly different meanings when home is an incarcerated space, threatenful and destructive, as it very often was in the twentieth-century South for people of African ancestry, these concepts retain nonetheless an association with the modern and with modernist perspectives on the lives of black people, for whom home, belonging, and roots retain meaning. In *Ride out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature* (1987), for example, Melvin Dixon places attempts to define self and to counter rootlessness or homelessness as central to understanding the key spaces recurrent in African American literary production. He identifies those geographical and mythical spaces as the wilderness, the underground, and the mountaintop and infers their relationship to modernist narratives. Because of his focus on African Americans, Dixon's work necessarily also contains an embedded, implied, but unstated relation to the South. While I am concerned, like Dixon, with the literature of African Americans, I am as well most interested in the ways in which the South as both literal and symbolic space produced social relations and constructed social identities or public expressions of power, whether in political institutions or domestic arenas. These concerns, rather than a focus similar to Dixon's on key tropes, inform my study. The social structures of segregation and inequality in the "separate but equal" era, for example, become a physical frame and a spatial lens through which creative writers could read their own modern condition and their cultural milieu.

*Southscapes* presses the social significance of space without the assumption of urban alienation or rural class conflict as the major tropes for thinking about southern spatial-racial matters since the 1970s. It follows Derek Gregory's view that "any standpoint is incomplete and situated, linked to power interest and refracted through various prisms of social position," and that "times and spaces are made by ordinary folk in everyday life, and that the outcomes are always contingent and never predetermined, even if . . . they are likewise never random or chaotic."<sup>35</sup> It values the work of Madhu Dubey in *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism* (2003) in examining the "twinning inheritance of print culture and urban modernity" in African American texts that contribute to postmodern culture.<sup>36</sup> It nevertheless moves away from her underpinning tropes of the book and communities of print readerships as identified by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (1983; 2006) and substitutes a spatial hermeneutics that takes both cities and rural communities as aspects of a multipronged postmodernism.