

NEW DIRECTIONS IN SOUTHERN STUDIES

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Southscapes

GEOGRAPHIES OF RACE, REGION,
& LITERATURE

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nyopia and exclusiveness that functioned in conjunction with nationalism and imperialism to maintain hegemony, power, and exceptionalism.

Counterbalancing the homogenous appeals of a new white southern "Sunbelt" was the prominent turning to historical fiction as a specific mode of expressive production by a number of black writers. The novel of blacks in the nineteenth- or early twentieth-century South emerged as a dominant form in the 1980s. It encompassed a displacement of the distance between real and imagined space. It was, however, no nostalgic turning back to a time when there were "good old days"; it was gut-wrenching revisioning of specifics long obscured by synoptic cultural patterning. A major example is Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987); however, in citing this novel, I do not mean to suggest, as one of my students did recently, that all black people in the United States are "southerners." Morrison is a midwesterner who until 1998 had never even visited her father's southern birthplace, Cartersville, Georgia, yet she reaches backward in time and into the South to claim a history, to explain a legacy, and to understand what I call "the regionality of the black self." In a radio interview, she called it the process of "appropriating and reclaiming" to counter racial discourse, which she describes in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* as "a way of referring to and disguising forces, events, classes, expressions of social decay and economic division far more threatening to the body politic than biological 'race' ever was."²⁷ She has persisted in this view in her collected essays, *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction* (2008), which takes its title and epigraph from her 1993 Nobel lecture: "Tell us what the world has been to you in the dark places and in the light. . . . Tell us what it is to be a woman so that we may know what it is to be a man. What moves at the margin. What it is to have no home in this place. To be set adrift from the one you knew. What it is to live at the edge of a town that cannot bear your company."²⁸

Morrison's iteration of being cut off from "home," of not belonging, of living in the space of exclusion, is in effect a way not only of addressing the condition but also of beginning a necessary redress that punctuated the 1980s and that persists in the twenty-first century. For instance, Natasha Trethewey, a writer born some thirty years after Morrison, revealed in 2004: "Being born in a place that is my home yet not my home . . . was infuriating. I am a native daughter, and yet I am a kind of outsider. . . . I am a non-daughter of the place that I was born, that is my home, and so I wanted to try to restore the narratives that have been overlooked, erased, or buried because another narrative has been inscribed upon the landscape with the naming of the roads and buildings and monuments."²⁹ Morrison's effort, then, is not an isolated one.

A similar effort began to appear with increasing frequency in the 1980s, from the writing of Californian Shirley Anne Williams in *Dessa Rose* (1986), Illinois-born Leon Forrest in *Two Wings to Veil My Face* (1983), and Pennsylvanian David Bradley in *The Chaneyville Incident* (1981) to Gloria Naylor (a New Yorker with roots in Mississippi and a room of her own on St. Helena Island, South Carolina) in *Mama Day* (1988) and J. California Cooper in *The Wake of the Wind* (1998). These works are by black outsiders to the region, who are nonetheless intimately involved in the process of writing not personal or individual history but communal and public history at the very moment when a form of dispersal different from the migrations earlier in the twentieth century was occurring. Much like the social scientists and humanists who, though not natives, take the region as their subject matter, these creative writers have functioned in the vanguard of evaluative work, of trying to reconfigure the possibilities of a communal space, a racial home, that has its basis in the familiar, in the historical place setting most associated with people of African descent in the United States, but that, simultaneously, gestures toward a configuration of space that has only been possible imaginatively.

The conclusions of these works all emphasize the recognition of place (the South and all of its meanings for blacks) as a major aspect of identity and the reunion of blacks positioned communally to face a new day. The last words of Williams's epilogue are: "*Mother, brother, sister, husband, friends . . . my own girlhood all I ever had was the remembrance of a daddy's smile. Oh, we have paid for our children's place in the world, again and again . . .*"³⁰ Her words reference space and all its implications, geographical, psychological, social. At the end of Morrison's narrative, Paul D thinks: "Only this woman Sethe could have left him his manhood like that. He wants to put his story next to hers." Touching her face and holding her fingers, he says, "Sethe . . . me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow."³¹ His concept of tomorrow includes not just the temporal but the spatial, in part because the past in the text has already been space-defined (the plantation, the house, the river, the six-mile woman, etc.). Forrest concludes with Nathaniel "unless[ing] his soul" at Great-Momma Sweetie Reed's "bedside altar": "Commanding him to silence, cursing, praying, denouncing, tendering up counter-memoirs, phrases from scriptures, spirituals, then only gestures; the gestures of sign language, and homemade ones spun up from the grievousness of her soul's captivity in a windstorm. . . . Only grief-stricken gestures, as her soul chased and chastened his words, long and deep into the night and unto the dawning light of the new day."³² These endings all utilize

the cathartic power of telling about the black experience in the South and the healing power of uniting with another's story in order to weave a necessary future within the narrative space of fictional texts.

Narrative space is where the social is constituted anew for black writers. The geographies of race and of region come together within the telling of the individual but simultaneously communal story in the observation of a place connection in the forging of an identity. Despite efforts to isolate blacks in material and narrative spaces that would restrict their possibilities for full creative living, these writers chose to constitute a black space through which the transmission and diffusion of their ideas could occur.

I maintain that the 1980s marked a decided shift among African American writers who considered "history" and the past and its relationship to the present moment by examining space, place, and location. In a sense, this period is both grounded by the temporal and unleashed by the spatial. In part, it is a recognition of a rapid and perhaps unanticipated move into a postmodern existence by people of African descent, who, having survived the ravages of extended modern segregation and the violence of desegregation, emerged into a dispersal away from traditional sites of black communal experience and into integrated but often isolating spaces that offer little means of coping with the residue of segregation. If, in the 1960s and 1970s during the civil rights movement and the concomitant black arts movement with its Black Power revolt, blacks turned their spatial attention to Africa, often configured as Mother Africa, for the inspiration to struggle against a segregationist regime for rights, justice, and equality, then in the 1980s blacks could become self-reflexive and consider not merely the limitations and violations of their citizenship within the United States or the material and symbolic Africa as a lost point of origin, but also how they could, within the spatial construct of freedom, enact rights and achieve justice. No longer needed was a recovery or acceptance of historical "fact" or historical location because narrative space opened up a new political comprehension instead.

The turn to historical formations, then, may be read as a turn to place matters as a site of relational identity, rather than as a return to slavery as a site of memory. In this sense, the move to a place-specific ground or to a claiming of land, to the South whether rural or urban, may be considered as a mode of constructing subjectivity. This move is not framed as an act of resistance to enslavement nor a potent healing of the trauma of slavery, though both resistance and healing may be significant for some writers. A claiming of the spatial ground of the South, then, is not a framing of a narrative of integration into the social network of white southerners from which blacks had been

excluded on the basis of race. More than a reclamation of an abject black body, it is an exertion of power over the very spatial configurations that could coerce an identity. In creative expressions of a power of authority over the land, or the staking of a claim of ownership rights, black writers during the 1970s and 1980s who produced "historical" fictions exercised their agency in creating black identities and actuated those identities in a world most often associated with "nature."

What these writers were doing with historical fiction form is a developmental and transformative outgrowth of the racially and culturally necessary work undertaken by Arna Bontemps, who pioneered a race- and region-specific historical fiction. Bontemps indeed recovered events as sites of memory in two important historical novels on black rebellions during enslavement: *Black Thunder: Gabriel's Revolt, Virginia 1800* (1936), based on an actual though failed insurrection that Gabriel Prosser planned to free enslaved blacks and capture Richmond; and *Drums at Dusk* (1939), based on the successful black revolution on Saint-Domingue that led to the founding of Haiti. His work became one starting point for the historical fictions in the 1970s and 1980s. Yet identifying Bontemps's place in relation to development during this period is not to assume, as critic Michael Kreyling does, that there is ever a metanarrative to uncover and thus to upset or unsettle older narratives; or assume, as does novelist Alice Randall in writing *The Wind Done Gone*, that the narrative of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* can be dislodged from its place in the cultural and human geography of the South by a new narrative, a "parody," from the perspective of Scarlett O'Hara's imagined black half sister.³³

Beginning in the 1960s, black southerners such as Margaret Walker Alexander in *Jubilee* (1966), Ernest Gaines in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), and Alice Walker in *The Color Purple* (1982) have all claimed the region as their own. With that claim, they created a cosmopolitan narrative space in which to explore the complexity of modern life through the lens of an African American past that is rooted in the South, necessarily replete with slavery and segregation. These texts were the harbingers of what would develop in the 1980s. Though they chose a particular individual as a vehicle for grounding their narratives of identity formation, these authors also envisioned a public acknowledgment of a communal history woven together in a landscape of interconnected lives. Walker's *Celie* says at the very end of *The Color Purple*: "I feel a little peculiar round the children. For one thing, they grown. And I see they think me and Nettie and Shug and Albert and Samuel and Harpo and Sofia and Jack and Odessa real old and don't know much

what going on. But I don't think us feel old at all. And us so happy. Matter of fact, I think this the youngest us ever felt."³⁴ Reunion reverses the emotional depressions that weigh down the spirit; the result is a buoying upward that Cele equates with youth. She makes her observation from the front porch, the spatial location that allows access to a multiplicity of references to both individual awareness and subjectivity and to community, including the African context of her long-lost sister and children. The litany of names reiterates the reunion of the black southern family and the African diasporic community as well as of their stories, once scattered in letters and in fragments of memory. The signal rejuvenations in spatial arrangements recuperate time and mark the beginning of a new era in a transformed place with transformed people.

Nonetheless, the problematic at stake, and not transparently so, is that the reunion of black diasporic bodies within the South of porch culture is a representation of a modern moment already past when Walker produces her novel. The modernist story of survival and overcoming the trauma of separation from Africa, of dislocation in the South and dispersal throughout the Western Hemisphere, builds upon shared racial experience that by the 1980s was being destabilized by changed social and environmental circumstances. That period marks a turning point toward a recognizable postmodernity that Walker begins to acknowledge in texts in which decentered subjects occupy the foreground of the narratives and evoke hostile critical responses for the very departure from master narratives or universalized stories of black life. The shift beginning in the 1980s is gradually toward an understanding that individuals who are decentered "invent their own radical subjective politics, and the production of identity (and place) becomes fragmentary, deeply conflicted and frequently contradictory."³⁵ The transnational made over into a narrative of conjoined and transformed blacks in the space between inside and outside, the porch, and in the space connecting past and present, the South, is a modern narrative that can be difficult to sustain given the divergent populations of black people who, beginning in the 1980s, have no common narrative in which all can participate and stake identity claims. bell hooks puts the issue plainly: "Postmodern culture with its decentered subject can be the space where ties are severed or it can provide the occasion for new and varied forms of bonding. To some extent, ruptures, surfaces, contextual-ity, and a host of other happenings create gaps that make space for oppositional practices."³⁶ She sees the issue as providing opportunity for a political reformation of the subject on the same ground that functions as the breaks between, the gaps interrupting ties of connection, or what Homi Bhabha and Edward Soja have termed Third Space.

The Color Purple reminds me that the intentional connection of race and region that resulted in an expanded definition of both southern culture and southern space is not merely reflex. It is an initiative that was hard to sustain or perhaps even unsustainable in the changed climate of U.S. life for black people after the 1970s. This aspect of a landscape of division that was not the understood and familiar segregationist binary world was insufficiently observed in the flurry of heated criticism over Walker's novel and the film version or in the ensuing debate between black men and women over the right to determine how the race should be portrayed in fiction. (That question was the subject of a symposium proposed by W. E. B. Du Bois in *Crisis*, February 1926, and posed again by Henry Louis Gates Jr. in *Black American Literature Forum*, Spring-Summer 1987 and Fall 1987, when the issue of racial representation once again became a major issue for black people.) The struggle was as well over who has the "right" to define space—whether the domestic space of black southern life or the rural South or the bodies of black women or even Africa as a transnational location—and ultimately over the representation of "blackness" and all of its attendant aspects. Moreover, the blacks represented were not all of a piece: not all were born in the United States, and not all had their formative experiences within the United States. The new reality underscored in the process was that there was no longer either agreement or the common ground on which agreement could easily be forged. Racial binaries of production and consumption gave way, and the result was unsettling. Put in the terms bell hooks has suggested, the struggle over representation around *The Color Purple*, novel and film, constituted "a space . . . there for critical exchange. It is exciting to think, write, talk about, and create art that reflects passionate engagement with popular culture, because this may very well be 'the' central future location of resistance struggle, a meeting place where new and radical happenings can occur."³⁷ In *The Same River Twice: Honoring the Difficult* (1996), Walker rehearses her responses to the controversies surrounding her novel and Steven Spielberg's film, and she fully addresses the complexities of competing claims to either belonging or not belonging in particular locations. Using the language of folk aphorism, she makes clear that because river waters flow constantly, a place in the river will not remain the same. In exploring the contested terrain that her novel and the subsequent film represented and provoked, she suggests, in a vein similar to hooks, that the experience provided a new place for critical exchange.

Overlooked too often in the Walker criticism is her fictional examination of racial and regional identity, along with gender identity, and her portrayal of a contemporary need to reinstate a black southern experience into cultural

and historical contexts despite the reality of pain that a truthful reinstatement necessarily bears. Walker was seeking a continuation of a communal racial identity, but one with a new flexibility to accommodate new understandings of gender roles and intraracial oppression. She was locating the black woman's body within discourse, what Michel de Certeau terms "enunciative focalizations."³⁸ As a means of redressing the exclusionary practices that have resulted in a limited notion of southern culture, Walker insisted in *The Color Purple*, as in her two earlier novels, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) and *Meridian* (1976), on writing blacks back into the shaping of an idea of southern culture, on the situating of blacks into the regionality of the South, but with a difference. This process, seen intermittently in her subsequent novels as well as in her poems and stories (particularly the much-anthologized "Everyday Use") and in her essays (especially "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens"), then telescopes a way of preserving black subjectivity in a rapidly changing world. "No one," Walker has concluded, "could wish for a more advantageous heritage than that bequeathed to the black writer in the South: a compassion for the earth, a trust in humanity beyond our knowledge of evil, and an abiding love of justice. We inherit a great responsibility . . . for we must give voice to centuries not only of silent bitterness and hate but also of neighborly kindness and sustaining love."³⁹ She articulates a sensibility not often considered in treatments of blacks and the South, specifically a sensibility with an emphasis on compassion, trust, love, and justice gleaned from the experience of being black in the South of oppressive power and a sensibility valued as the necessary way forward. The exercise of power by whites who controlled southern space and thus black southerners that Walker acknowledges is a conception of geographical space and power articulated by Michel Foucault in *Power/Knowledge*: "A whole history remains to be written of spaces—which would at the same time be the history of powers."⁴⁰ Walker's concept, however, turns on the ability of blacks to seize control of how they respond to and write their spatial-racial experience under controlling powers.

Looking back at the 1980s as a decided shift toward space, place, and location, I would claim that perhaps at no other time has there been so visible an evidence or manifestation of historical imagination in a specified cultural context among black creative writers and their critics as well. Beginning in the 1980s, retrieval projects directed attention to historical texts that had been lost: Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s collection *The Classic Slave Narratives* (1987), Jean Fagin Yellin's edition of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1986), William Andrews's collection *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's*

Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century (1986), and Mary Helen Washington's critical anthology *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women, 1860–1960* (1987). In the aftermath, the 1990s witnessed a continuation and expansion that extended into the new century with a slowed pace of retrieval. Was this general activity evidence of a perverse love affair between blacks and the old South? Obviously not; it suggests that something else was at work that may be related to a space-time shifting that was being accommodated in the ways of representing identity and location in the world but that almost imperceptibly registered the shift from a modern to a postmodern positionality for black people in the United States.

Bernice Johnson Reagon advises: "If, in moving through your life, you find yourself lost, go back to the last place where you knew who you were, and what you were doing, and start again from there."⁴¹ Her astute comment, uttered initially during a Sweet Honey in the Rock concert in Durham, North Carolina, early in the 1980s and later written expressly for anthropologist Carol Stack as an epigraph for *Call to Home: African Americans Reclaim the Rural South*, goes directly to the issue of self-identity located within and constituted out of a known place.⁴² Reagon's notion of return, an embodied relocation different from the Freudian return of the repressed, is invested in place as a key to the identity, self-knowledge, and well-being of a person. Her words seem prophetic, particularly in conjunction with one fascinating example of location and place involving Alex Haley, but not in terms of his historical reconstruction in *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976).⁴³

Before his death in 1992, Haley bought and refurbished a 120-acre antebellum farm in East Tennessee, where he staked his claim not merely as a black man but as a southerner. Perhaps *Roots* and its television spin-offs, *Roots: The Second Generation* and *Henning, Tennessee*, took hold of him to the extent that he could no longer resist the pull of region in shaping an identity. Haley, however, was not about a quiet, unpublicized relocation; he announced his move to Norris, Tennessee, and the opening of his manor house and "gentleman's farm" with a week-long party to which he invited 250 guests from around the world.⁴⁴ He also opened the fête to newspaper and magazine reporters. Here was a private black self functioning in concert with a very sophisticated public self. Haley's performance as a black descendant of enslaved people turned owner of the manor house constitutes new history in the making: a redefinition of identity and meaning that hinges upon the intersection of race and region, upon the claiming of place and space, upon the inversion of traditional paradigms of power, and upon the determination that the activity does not go unnoticed.

In the face of increasing dispersion out of the familiar spaces of modern black life, Haley's creation of his Tennessee place suggests a point Linda McDowell makes in thinking about spatial locations and politics: "Places are made through power relations which construct the rules which define boundaries. These boundaries are both social and spatial—they define who belongs to a place and who may be excluded, as well as the location or site of the experience."⁴⁵ Haley asserted an authority over the very concept of farm/plantation and the cultural force it represented. In the process, he determined that those who "belonged" would be constituted out of those who historically would have been the excluded.

In the aftermath of Haley's phenomenal success with *Roots*, it became increasingly clear that African Americans were shaping a contramodern identity out of the individual and communal, the personal and societal, the communal and cultural, and upon the very landscapes that had denied them meaning and subjectivity. Noticeably in relation to the narrative concerns here, Haley purchased land, property, a farm and a house with the money earned from the telling of the story of the capture and subsequent enslavement and sale of his African ancestor Kunta Kinte. With the flowering of genealogical searches in Africa and the South occupying a greater and larger portion of the black population, there is no mistaking the search for a way to claim a repressed, suppressed, and alienated part of the self that coincides with racial identity and is tied to the conceptualization of "roots"—the land and identity formation—space and a way of thinking about self. Haley formed a connection between diasporic geographies previously only dreamed about or imagined, and he made those geographies not merely central but a lived reality of the connective links between African Americans and Africans, between the landscape of the Americas and the land mass of the African continent. In a sense, he transformed the past and its unattainable temporality into the space of the present and the geographies of the future.

Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) appeared the year after the publication of *Roots*. In this groundbreaking fiction, Pilate Dead travels about the South not only with a bag of ancestral bones, which is most often noticed in readings of the text, but also with a geography book, which Melvin Dixon astutely points out in his treatment of *Song of Solomon*.⁴⁶ As part of Morrison's mapping of the South, Pilate's geography book is significant for its representation of a value assigned to a way of knowing the external world and reading the ontological. The geography of mobility and freedom evident in Morrison's Pilate suggests a connection Patricia J. Williams made in *Open House* between mobility and modernity: "We want to escape the world, the world escapes

us. . . . America was founded on the ability to escape the status of serf; we are committed to the notion that it is possible and desirable to step out of one's place in a given society, go where one wishes and be governed by nothing but individual ability and free will."⁴⁷ Yet, for African Americans with a knowledge of the difference between serf and slave, while escape may well be a motivation, there is also the attempt to find a location that reorientates a life away from dislocation and toward a stopping place, "a simulacra of home," where, as Williams puts it, "we are known but that we have never known, a place where the static is less a prison than an idealized source of peace."⁴⁸ Pilate carries the geography book as a reminder and map of possible locations.

What Morrison, Haley, Williams, and a host of black writers have recognized about the pleasure and the pain of recuperating the history of a people displaced from their African origins and in search of what Williams calls "the simulacra of home," Harryette Mullen has expressed succinctly in her poem "Exploring the Dark Content":

This dream is not a map.

A poem is not the territory.

The dreamer reclines in a barbershop
carpeted with Afro turf.

In the dark some soul yells.

It hurts to walk barefoot
on cowrie shells.⁴⁹

Mullen points to the pain in the act of return that is also a retrieval of space and spatial connection over time and fractured heritages, though the fractures remain in place, unmoved even if reimagined. Punctuating the dream of a return to the stolen and lost past, to Africa as ancestral homeplace mapped from safe utilitarian places made to correspond to the map of discovery, is the voice of a reality, the incongruous truth of what lies beyond the symbol of the territory. While the modernist dream is constituted in historical consciousness, the subjective postmodern acknowledgment, as Mullen demonstrates, is of the inability to either arrest or inhabit the past.

The retrieval of space and with it subjective formation is at the center of efforts to build public monuments and living museums to the lost and painful past. African heritage sites, slave forts and villages, and U.S. sites of enslavement all link to the act of reclaiming that is simultaneously also an act of invention, evident with Haley's creation of a new plantation as an extension of his black southern identity. Inspired by Haley, one extended family of North

Carolinian blacks traced their ancestry back to a particular plantation, Somerset Place, and held a reunion in 1986 at the plantation their ancestors built during the 1830s. The genealogist of the family, Dorothy Spruill Redford, discovered twenty-one families all descended from those enslaved on Somerset Place. Though they lacked a sophisticated mechanism for explaining the necessity of returning to, of all places, the white plantation or of the meaning of that particular return, they were nonetheless affirming unequivocally their sense of connection to the public image of the region, of themselves as black southerners with a share in the monuments of white southerners. As with Haley, their private need functioned along with their concerted manipulation of public images and measured media campaign to attract attention.

Historian Nell Irvin Painter, covering the first Somerset Homecoming for a local newspaper, pointed out that the participants concentrated on family not slavery, but “slavery was obviously the ghost of the feast” and “the central public theme.”⁵⁰ The organizer, Redford, as family spokesperson, said: “For me this homecoming is a healing . . . and I will leave feeling whole and more complete as a human being, as will all who attend.”⁵¹ Although Redford and her kin found it necessary in spoken comments to obliterate the more painful reality of their common racial and regional past in favor of their celebratory homecoming, current successes, and material acquisitions, they were moved by an unarticulated belief that their presence made a statement about their conjoined participation in restructuring and reconceptualizing a southern culture that could no longer omit their existence and significance. Both Redford and Painter spoke to the movement away from thinking of place, the plantation home, as a site of nostalgia; neither retreated from the fact of slavery as the ghost of pain, fragmentation, and dehumanization on public display within a public space that is not bounded or unproblematical.

The highly publicized reunion at Somerset resulted in Redford’s book documenting that first gathering on the plantation grounds. Her Somerset *Homecoming: Recovering a Lost Heritage* (1988), written with Michael D’Orso, carried an introduction by Alex Haley in which he commented of Redford’s narrative: “[I]t’s all our stories.” Haley, who attended the Somerset Homecoming, saw “the scores of families, all returned to the soil of their ancestors, resurrecting the spirit of their kin who came before” as “connections . . . the thread that ran back through the generations and will must surely run ahead into the future.”⁵² Redford went even further than Haley by stating that she believed interest in the Somerset event was the result of an interest in life, as opposed to slavery’s concern with death: “we were finding our roots here, connecting with family, celebrating strength and survival.”⁵³ She sug-

gested that unlike the reporter from New York who expected tears and pain, “[m]any of the more than a hundred newspaper, radio and television reporters who arrived were Southerners. This was homecoming for them, too. And it was something wholesome, something to be proud of. This wasn’t the kind of story they’d come to expect from the South.”⁵⁴

Redford was so right when she remarked that many of the reporters were also southerners, white southerners, experiencing a homecoming. Since the publicized event at Somerset, there has been a trickle of explorations by white southerners of their pasts in relation to slavery. *Slaves in the Family*, for example, is Edward Ball’s carefully researched examination of slavery on the South Carolina plantations owned by his family. He documented the lives of the enslaved people who built the Ball family’s plantations and their wealth through two centuries. In an interview, Ball recounted why he, a successful New York journalist, returned to Charleston and the plantations of South Carolina and what investigating his past meant to him: “The Balls lived side-by-side with black families for six generations . . . but I never knew much about the slaves, even though on the plantations black people far outnumbered the white. What were their names? How did they live? Who were their loved ones?”⁵⁵ The gap in his family’s stories of their plantation life and the silent piece of their history emerged for Ball in the recognition of slaves in all gaps and silences. The shared environment with its necessary but unacknowledged interactions of differently raced bodies in the plantation culture of slavery became a way for Ball to realize all the implications of his privilege and his family’s wealth and status. Like Alex Haley, Ball traced the slaves owned by his family back to West Africa and, remarkably, filled in aspects of the long-observed history of enslavement on the African continent. Like Dorothy Redford, Ball returned to Limerick, one of the Ball plantations, accompanied by Thomas Martin, a seventh-generation descendant of Priscilla, who in 1756 was purchased from African traders in Sierra Leone and enslaved at Limerick. Both men believe that, despite the misgivings of their families about excavating a painful past, their return to Limerick was a pilgrimage to “hallowed ground” where together they can make “a gesture toward reconciliation.”⁵⁶

In 1998, the same year that Ball received a National Book Award for *Slaves in the Family*, the North Carolina Humanities Council honored Redford for “work that goes to the very heart and soul of understanding slavery, work in words and in organizing and in preservation that enhance our nation’s sense of self-understanding”; in his keynote address on the occasion, the writer Randall Kenan said, “By honoring Ms. Spruill Redford’s extraordinary work, the North Carolina Humanities Council joins in this exciting time of recovery

and remembrance, where, step by step, by fits and starts, we grapple more seriously and honestly and completely with the obscured and forgotten history of African Americans and of Americans of all hues.”⁵⁷

For the organizers of the Somerset Homecoming, as Painter reported, the “reunion represented a nonjudgmental acknowledgment of the historical attachment of several generations to a certain place,” but she wondered whether they were encouraging a “fantasy,” one that collapses time and lives historically and “reduces every black person into no more than a descendant of slaves, and . . . elevates every white person into a descendant of planters,” particularly “in these days of rampant backward-glancing and pining after the good old days when the South’s lower classes stayed in their places.”⁵⁸ Painter’s judgment would resurface a decade later in critiques of the heritage plantation tours and living history sites of enslavement in the South. Perhaps, however, the point of Somerset Homecoming and the similar events in southern locations that followed is more in keeping with Julius Lester’s affirmation in *Do Lord Remember Me* (1984), which opens with a character’s writing himself into a time and place (“*The Reverend Joshua Smith, Sr. was born November 5, 1900 in Ouchitta, Mississippi*”) and ends with his gathering all of his past and future together “at the very edge of that moment coming on like the morning star giving a benediction to the night, he began.”⁵⁹ Reclamation ultimately is also a means of creative invention in which “history” and “fiction” necessarily intersect, interact, and fuse.

The issue is important in terms of the black families’ seeking so openly to validate their “homeplace,” to authenticate their ancestors’ lives and labor at Somerset, and thereby to transform plantation myth and ideology that would deny the roles of the “Baums, Bennetts, Blunts, Cabarruses, Dickenses, Honeyblues, Lees, Sawyers, Spruills, Treadwells, and Trotters”⁶⁰ in building Somerset Plantation and would insert in their places the white Josiah Collins family, which owned the land, the slaves, and the house. However, it is also important in terms of the other related activities I have described here: the prominence of the historical novel form among black writers, the purchase of an old Tennessee estate by Alex Haley, and so on. Despite all of the implicit convolutions of historical, psychological, and familial baggage, these developments manifest an insistent regionality of black selves, a grassroots redefinition, and signs of a public claim to the South that cannot be ignored. This latter may be the key to why these more recent activities may make a larger difference in expanding conceptions and perceptions of the region. It is based upon an intrinsic awareness that cultural products are manufactured, and upon a determination to manipulate that reality at long last for their own private

well-being and public benefit. It is as well another way of comprehending spatial dimension of social organization and of its transforming power.

Somerset Homecoming was the precursor of twenty-first-century designs of public spaces commemorating those individuals who were enslaved. It announced a change that prompted wider acknowledgment of the usually unmarked sites of enslavement and of slavery’s benefits to grand estates, such as Jefferson’s Monticello in Virginia, and to public buildings of the new republic, such as the first White House in Philadelphia. These became better known as structures that were built by slave labor and in which enslaved people worked, served, and suffered. These new sites, living history museums replete with heritage tours, have since the 1980s moved from the ignored background of consciousness by people of African American descent to another aspect of destination, vacations, and tourism that convey the recuperation of the past and carry added aspect of reasserting racial identity.⁶¹ This latter, the body as both spatial marker and identity marker, is one of the more obvious legacies of Somerset Homecoming, though it is just beginning to receive critical attention. This new form of tourism, however, is obviously problematic. It also cannot begin to forge an overall cohesiveness of community and purpose in the current postmodern moment, despite the fact that these new sites, marking the existence of black people in history and inserting black bodies into a new narrative of nation, indeed function to represent individual strands of a narrative of modern black subjectivity that wards off a postmodern, decentered subject position. This form of experiencing the past in a virtual reality existing parallel to or even surrounding the present moment is ultimately also *not* history, but only the newly constituted *unreal*, virtual real, that can, and most likely will, become a new narrative space in the future. Natasha Trethewey, in “Pilgrimage—Vicksburg, Mississippi,” contemplates what the brochure in her room in one of the restored southern antebellum mansions calls “*living history*” and understands the problematics of the space marked “*Prissy’s Room*” and its relationship to a black body: “A window frames / the river’s crawl; toward the Gulf. In my dream, / the ghost of history lies down beside me, / rolls over, pins me beneath a heavy arm.”⁶²

The room bearing Prissy’s name is home for neither Prissy in the past nor the speaker in the poem; it is, as Williams observed of every attempt to locate a life toward “a simulacra of home,” that which never was and cannot be recovered. Trethewey’s reflection allows the room to flow through the window into the river and toward the open space of the Gulf of Mexico, but both Prissy and the narrator remain closed in, pinned down not only by “dead” history but also by the narrator’s own “living” dream as well.

