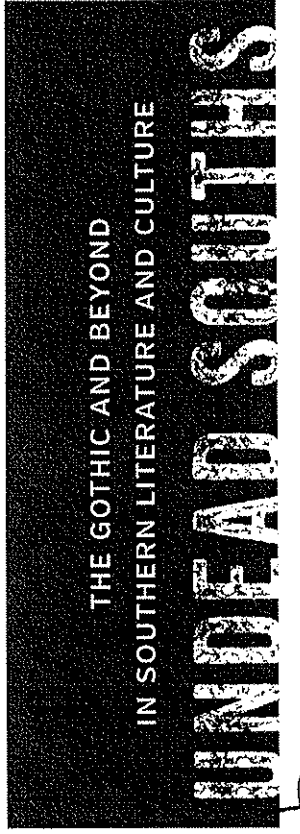


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## INTRODUCTION

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When William Faulkner wrote, "The past is never dead. It's not even past," he probably wasn't thinking about zombies. But these sentences, which themselves rise up again and again, call to mind the pervading presence of diverse forms of undeadness—racial, ethnic, political, economic, historical—in "the South" as we understand it. *Undead Souths* considers literature, films, and other media that explore representations of death and deathways as well as figures returned from the grave. Undeadness describes a wide continuum of posthumous phenomena, from funerary rites and mourning practices to the shocking, overwhelming affect of terrifying spectacles and posttraumatic flashbacks, to figures from beyond death: ghosts, vampires, zombies, but also corpses unburied, decayed, desecrated, dismembered, yet still filled with life, or a kind of life, be it with the multitude of microorganisms drawing sustenance from decomposing bodies or the psychical afterlife of remembering the dead. This necrological impulse can also incarnate in metaphorical ways in texts that may not feature literal revenants but that present tropes of undeadness.

This collection engages such forms of southern haunting in a variety of historical and intercultural contexts that can be seen as being part of the South. Certain elements present themselves immediately in recognizably "southern" situations in conventional notions of the U.S. South. For example, zombification has been offered as a telling metaphor for the institution of

race-based chattel slavery in the U.S. South, a legally encoded death-in-life existence expounded through Orlando Patterson's influential concept of "social death."<sup>1</sup> Even after slavery's abolishment, as Faulkner well understood, the "peculiar institution" remained a tragically powerful presence in the Jim Crow South. At the same time, the Confederacy's demise almost instantaneously gave birth to a Lost Cause ethos that suspiciously bears the marks of undeadness in its symbolic resurrection of fallen C.S.A. hero-saints. Indeed, the post-Appomattox, postemancipation, postplantation South was the site of numerous reburials of Confederate dead, physical resurrections that kept undead the searing memory of that nationalist insurrection against the U.S.A.<sup>2</sup> The essays herein discuss various revisitings of these familiar grounds, but they also explore the ways the tentacles of the U.S. South reach far and deep—into Haiti, which has its own "zombie" presence; into the soil of a Native South that preceded the construction of the South as the political-cultural imagined community it has been since the first decades of the nineteenth century; into the quasi-space of photographs, film, and the panels in comic books, where "southern" can be both enforced and reimaged in complex and radical ways. These kinds of spaces wash back onto already-held notions of the South, making it strange enough to be, at times, maybe even unrecognizable.

While we set out to reinvigorate important texts often classified under the aegis of the Southern Gothic (e.g., Poe, Faulkner, O'Connor, Cormac McCarthy), we also want to encourage closer attention to perhaps less obvious, but equally trenchant literature and media trafficking in southern undeadness. No longer satisfied with merely sitting up with the dead—that is, viewing the dead as hermetically sealed off from contemporaneous life, quarantined into the past—the essays in *Undead Souths* show how the dead contain cultural vibrancy in the present: if we let them in on the critical conversation, the still-living dead will speak volumes. The included essays offer new ideas and language to account for the various forms of haunting and horror associated with the U.S. South—not merely sameness masquerading as difference. This is accomplished not only by the integration of new critical schemata, but also by the sheer spectrum of topics, which span from original perspectives on the aforementioned southern literary giants; to various new mediations of the Confederate undead; to occluded crossings between Native and black displacements in Charles W. Chesnut's fiction; to southeastern Choctaw

funeral rituals and ghostly genealogies; to "hillbilly" horror flicks set in the "mountain South"; to the spectral architectonics of old New Orleans; to Civil War daguerreotypes and the poetic rejoinders of the current U.S. poet laureate, Natasha Trethewey; to posthumous political articulations of Emmett Till's fate; to rhizomorphic global South iterations, including Haitian zombie mythology in Herman Melville's depiction of chattel and wage slaves, transregional reroutings and rerootings between T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Wilson Harris's *Jonestown*, circum-Caribbean emanations in the "plantation horror" genre of classic U.S. cinema, as well as diasporic transplantations in the surreal fiction of the Irish-born, Trinidadian author Shani Mootoo; and to considerations of undeadness as a figure for southernfiguration itself across an array of media, including cinema (*White Zombie* and *Two Thousand Maniacs!*), television (*True Blood* and *The Walking Dead*), and comics (*Bayou* and *The Goon*)—and many, many undead things in between.

While proposing arguments that push past or at least navigate confining essentialist and exceptionalist definitions of the region, *Undead Souths* examines the continuing importance of the local as a prime space of political, economic, and social interactions that deeply influence and are influenced by national and global issues. Even amid this fluid, transnational, transcultural backdrop, figures of the southern undead abound and remain very much grounded in the southern cultural landscape. *How* and *why* is the South so undead? *How* and *why* do the remains of the South's always mixed, often vexed histories keep rising again? Just as the undead figures bodied forth in the texts under scrutiny pass through boundaries, so *Undead Souths* aims to cross established intellectual thresholds, summoning multiethnic, transnational influences within and without the traditional geographic and conceptual bounds of the U.S. South. The essays in *Undead Souths* cover a great deal of ground, spanning the collection of spaces and places identifiable as southern from the Appalachians southward to the Caribbean and stretching into the U.S. West.

This book thus casts a wide net, including essays by both established and emerging scholars on both canonical and less familiar texts in a variety of forms, from many historical periods, and driven by diverse critical and theoretical approaches. Rather than insist on common, consensual definitions of "the South" and "southernness," we gather together multiple, nuanced arguments about the meanings and the viability of these terms. The

essays explore a broad spectrum of ways in which the South has been and, indeed, remains undead. Individual essays, like the volume as a whole, take into account changes that have been wrought in southern studies over the past decade, and our book helps map as well as redefine the field. At the same time, the essays herein engage various linked fields, such as African American studies, Native American studies, gender and sexuality studies, and film/new media studies. Naturally, we are also interested in advancing evolving work on horror and the gothic, popular genres that have taken on new life (pun intended) in television and other productions—for example, *True Blood* and *The Walking Dead*—set in the contemporary South.

The primary aim of *Undead Souths*, then, is to make sense of the multitude of undead figures and figurations proliferating in southern culture over the past two centuries, and to do so in original ways by driving critical discussion beyond the now-threadbare tropes of “the Southern Gothic”—singular and capitalized—as if both the region (“Southern”) and the genre (“Gothic”) are readily identifiable, monolithic entities. Indeed, in some traditional readings, “Southern” and “Gothic” become nearly synonymous. There is the standard checklist of gothic motifs: “haunted houses, evil villains, ghosts, gloomy landscapes, madness, terror, suspense, horror” (Goddu 5) as well as “tangled genealogies, subterranean flights, incest, doubles, supernatural incursions, and, of course, hauntings” (Bailey 4). The essays in *Undead Souths* diversify and expand this myopic view, pluralizing regional and generic identifications into multiple, even contradictory forms of what counts as “southern” and as “gothic”—all the while unsettling settled ideas of connections between the two. Old tropes of the Southern Gothic are themselves now decayed, long-standing images and ideas mummified and cracking into dust. While these essays acknowledge the continuing presence of this older idea of the gothic, they primarily work to think beyond that often-bounded term.

The work herein, moreover, explores fear and form in ways that resist the political acquiescence and escapist overtones often connected with the gothic and horror genres. On the contrary, these essays mark out the undead South as a crucial space for intellectual, emotional, and political commitments that shed light on why so much southern literature/media has been—and continues to be—so dark. *Undead Souths* looks to make the darkness visible, not as an escape into an alternate reality or fantasy world, but as an unruly means of political and social confrontation. To see dead people is to face the

past and its many cultural irruptions in the present. In analyzing diverse images of southern necrologies, we unveil how these eerie figures record, critique, and/or invent convulsive, disruptive constructions of the South. In so doing, they force us to reimagine an already imaginary South. Southbound specters become holograms of an otherwise inarticulate, often distressing past. Vampires below the Mason-Dixon puncture and punctuate the region’s bloodthirsty histories and bring them back to life. Dixie-fied zombies feed on cultural mindlessness and brainless devotion to rote codes of value. These supposedly unreal undead forms become all-too-real, counteracting the derealization of the southern past and present. The southern undead haunt the region’s status as “a consumption-based economy—the South of the museum, the reenactment, the themed space, the tourist destination” (Romine, *The Real South* 5). The ephemeral reproductions of clichéd southernness that Scott Romine sharply exposes in *The Real South* (2008) seem to be aiding and abetting a kind of cultural zombiism. It is this submission to empty repetition of past cultural modes, a will-less recitation of past citations of what signifies southernism, that *Undead Souths* aims to address and redress.

With these things in mind, we have focused on “undeadness” as a new term both more flexible and more precise, able to encompass older concepts of the Southern Gothic while allowing room for additional modes of theorization. For both the editors and the contributors, “undead” is a metaphor, a receptacle, a mode. These essays endow undeadness with a dense theoretical texture, and identify ways in which southern undeadness comes in and out of contact with other manifestations of southernness. While “gothic” is often constricted by the weight of both generic and regionalist expectations, “undeadness” is rooted in and routed through a surprisingly dynamic physicality. Undeadness also intensifies the frequency and range of encounters between inextricably amalgamated human and nonhuman forms, from the makeup of the human corpus to the structures of natural and built environments. The material insistence of undeadness broaches the grotesque (often considered a subcategory of the gothic) in exposing the physical underpinnings of human subjectivity as transformations in and of the body spark and shadow mutations in and of consciousness. Yet undeadness also expands to illuminate more subtle interchanges between the animate and inanimate, worrying the very lines between the two and

challenging an anthropocentric conception of ecology, which should be no longer viewed as mechanistic, inert, something to be mastered by humanity. Such imbrications with the nonhuman surround, which show how extensively and intensively “inanimate” bodies and things express agency within, and beyond, cultural systems, gesture toward Monique Allewaert’s account of the “parahuman” in *Ariel’s Ecology* (2013), according to which humans, nonhuman animals, and the environs coalesce into a “more than human collectivity . . . not grounded on human exceptionalism” (113). In a turn particularly pointed for figurations of southern undeadness, the parahuman acts acutely in concert with the black diaspora across the U.S. South, for whom “the brutal colonial circumstance of dismemberment and bodily disaggregation” generated models of personhood “that registered a deep skepticism about the desirability of the category of the human” (86).

Crosshatching current developments in physics and biology (the latent vibrancy of all matter that reflects levels of agency beyond human choice) as well as philosophy (the turn to posthumanist thought), undeadness speaks to a new understanding of human bodies as always contingent, transformative assemblages of human and nonhuman, living and dead materials. The textualities interpreted throughout *Undead Souths* envision bodies, living/dying/dead/undead, as “vibrant matter,” per Jane Bennett: biological-cultural-environmental congregations that counter the long-held notion of “an intrinsically inanimate matter” while revealing “the material agency or effectivity of nonhuman or not-quite-human things” (ix). Just as, through the lens of undeadness, we see more clearly the constructed nature of the individual body and therefore of subjectivity, we also note how extrahuman materials and forces infuse and influence cultural and political bodies, as traditions and other institutional practices take on a life of their own—though at times such forms outlive their efficacy, the structures ossify, undergoing the endless recyclings of cultural zombification.

This idea of undeadness links to recent notions of object-oriented ontology founded in intricate mergings, even on a subatomic level, between human and nonhuman matter. Drawing on quantum mechanics and post-humanist philosophy, object theory describes how purportedly “animate” and “inanimate” materials interface inside and alongside the human body, calling attention to the thingness of humans and the agency of the nonhuman surround.<sup>3</sup> Undeadness, thus understood, is further entwined with

concepts of disease, infection, and contamination and therefore consonates with recent anxieties over global pandemics and how these threaten to corrupt masses of individual human bodies as well as the projected consistency and soundness of bodies politic, regional and national. Undead art forms can help bring to the surface the politics behind how we attempt to quarantine not simply the infectious contagions themselves but also the potential social menace surrounding the emergence and spread of such diseases. Several of the visions of undeadness analyzed in *Undead Souths* represent what Priscilla Wald terms “outbreak narratives”: medical, media, and literary/cinematic accounts that seek to explain and contain the ill effects of the sociopolitical threats brought on by mass contagion. Exploring the “epidemiology of belonging,” Wald notes the interspersion of medical and cultural-ideological conceptions of purity, infestation, and containment in outbreak narratives that often display a faith in herd mentality espoused by a discrete population alongside a desire to scapegoat the outlier as potential carrier of infestation into the group. Such tensions—commingling narratological, medical, and sociological strands—may well put us in mind of how the undead rarely mind their own business but work hard to unsettle the livings’ business-as-usual. Consider, for instance, how the Louisianan vampires of *True Blood* infect their human others with life-changing, identity-shifting blood-borne pathogens in a manner that bites back against the ghettoization of HIV patients in outbreak narratives encircling the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and 1990s. Or think of the endless throngs of sick and sickening zombies peopling the pages/screen of *The Walking Dead* who stumble forth tirelessly in the thin rags of civilization, appearing always in bad taste and bad health, yet unfazed by our containment strategies. Ranging from rural Kentucky to downtown Atlanta, these zombies embody equally ripe contagion-carriers that disable the working order of the “healthy” humanoid herd while debasing our social and economic codes of value. The infected, infectious zombified masses induce widespread panic as they broadcast (quite literally through the AMC television remediation of Robert Kirkman’s graphic narrative) a highly communicable dis-ease with the instabilities of contemporary U.S. and southern political economies, our lack of immunity to internal and external modes of catastrophe.<sup>4</sup>

By incorporating new, constructive critical frames rising out of undeadness, *Undead Souths* more vigilantly and more vigorously traces the “eerie

life of the dead in an age without ghosts, that is, the matter that escapes the concept that ought to master it by making it thinkable" (Horowitz 97). The volume more effectively historicizes horror by considering the U.S. South, not in isolation, but in connection with other cultures and places. The aesthetics of undeadness are given cultural and geographic specificity by interleaving these images with emerging scholarship in southern studies, including critiques of essentialist and exceptionalist definitions of the South associated with the New Southern Studies; work on critical race theory and depictions of the Native South as well as convergences between southern and Caribbean cultures; new conceptions of horror and haunting that unbury underlying economic and sociological drives; and redefinitions of affect that move past the fatalistic cycle of trauma, personal and cultural, as a chronic condition with no hope for improvement. The essays in *Undead Souths* reveal how the region cannot be spitted away into political obsolescence and cultural oblivion. To invert the famous words from Flannery O'Connor's Hazel Motes, the South is a cultural space where what's dead *doesn't* stay that way, with major impacts on the region's present and future.

## NOTES

1. Describing the cultural ways in which slaves are marked as social aliens who have no rightful place in the master's community, Patterson asserts that "the definition of the slave as an outsider, as the enemy within who is socially dead, allows for solidarity between master and nonslave as honorable members of their community vis-à-vis the dishonored slave" (34). The structure of cultural practices and symbolic rituals that conferred authority onto the master relied on an "overwhelming concentration on the profound natal alienation of the slave" (38): "The slave is violently uprooted from his milieu. He is desocialized and depersonalized. This process of social negation constitutes the first, essentially external, phase of enslavement. The next phase involves the introduction of the slave into the community of his master, but it involves the paradox of introducing him as a nonbeing. This explains the importance of law, custom, and ideology in the representation of the slave relation" (38).
2. For more on the exhumation and reburial of dead Confederates, see Drew Gilpin Faust's *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (2008) and William Blair's *Cities of the Dead: Contesting the Memory of the Civil War in the South, 1865–1914* (2004).
3. Key expositions of object-oriented ontology include Karen Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglements of Matter and Meaning* (2007), Graham Harman's *Towards Speculative Realism* (2010), Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010), and Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (2013).

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4. This deep cross-hatching between medical and social forms of contagion has long held association with southern culture, as Melissa Stein contends in her assessment of the role of scientific discourse in bolstering Jim Crow down South: "[W]hite supremacists both within and outside medical science often used disease and contagion as rhetorical devices to frame their discussions of post-Emancipation race relations more generally, particularly the place of the black race in America's body politic. These medical metaphors resonated for a broad audience in the United States during this period, which saw a sharp increase in public health education and disease consciousness" (126).