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Toward "A New Southern Studies"

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Abstract

The life histories of academic fields of study are punctuated by revolutions. The field of southern literary studies has been in the process of such a change over the past several years. Anthologies for classroom use reflect this change by trying to capture commercial value as textbooks of the "new." *The South in Perspective* (Prentice Hall, 2001), edited by Edward Francisco, Robert Vaughan, and Linda Francisco, is one such anthology; it strives to ride the new wave by redistributing historical periods and shaking up thematic categories. Not all of its revisions are successful.

Literary critical activity is another index of change. As the study of literature in general moves from centering on the text to grazing on the context, or the cultural conditions under which texts are produced and in which they have and express meaning, so the study of southern literature (long a bastion of formalist and text-centered criticism) has been shaken up by turns fueled by gender studies, studies in globalization and "new geography," new historicism, and culture studies. Houston A. Baker, Jr. and Dana D. Nelson have edited

a special issue of *American Literature* (June 2001; 73:2) subtitled "Violence, the Body, and 'The South,'" which contains several essays calling for and demonstrating new approaches to familiar texts and unfamiliar texts in the frame of southern studies. Sometimes, however, in the drive to be new old wine is funneled into new bottles. A certain critical parallax sometimes obscures the fact that what "old" critics have written is often close to, if not identical to, what the "new" have expressed in the new vocabularies.

Still, there are examples of new departures on familiar routes. Houston A. Baker's *Turning South Again: Re-thinking Modernism/Re-reading Booker T.* (Duke University Press, 2001) re-reads *Up from Slavery* in the context of Baker's own life as an African American scholar coming of age in the latter half of the twentieth century, and in the harsh current context of social crisis for young African American males who, Baker charges, are ill-served and led by a cadre of conservative African American intellectuals--as the people were by Booker T. Washington in the latter nineteenth century.

Toward "A New Southern Studies"¹

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PARADIGM SHIFTS ARE REDISTRIBUTIONS OF POWER; some players sprint into new territory, some continue by the old rules, hoping that the shift is an illusion or that another turn will bring the wheel back to *status quo ante*, still others twist slowly in the wind unable to decide between the old and the new. Southern studies is in such a shift now, struggling to absorb several "new" discourses: memory and trauma studies and a new geography spurred by interest in globalization being the most prominent.² Becoming "new" has always been a problem for a discipline with so much of its foundation dedicated to strict borders: who was white and who was not, what was literature and what was not, what was southern and what was not.

What, if anything, is distinctive in the present, protracted shift from southern literature (now an outdated term for what we study) to southern studies? Is the difference one of content or of style—reversing figure and ground, for example? Certain revisionist genres, such as the neo-slave narrative, headline the current wave of change; but what do they give us that we did not have under the old dispensation? I have been in the field long enough now to have been an agent in the shift from southern literature to southern studies; in fact, I called for new departures and reevaluations of the work of the predecessors on which we all stand in 1988—almost a different era now.³ In such shifts there is always an element of calculated amnesia, strategic forgetting. This is far from heinous, although sometimes it is embarrassing. We do make progress, but crabwise rather than in a straight line, and we often return to a place near our starting point, if not, as some might claim, actually at it again.

The early history of the field from the mid-twentieth century, as reflected in anthologies, is ample proof of our cycles. Anthologies are the great scum of the field, grinding forward on multiple legs to engulf the new while they re-digest the old. As Houston A. Baker, Jr., exclaims in mock surprise in his neo-slave narrative, *Turning South Again* (2001)—about which, as they say, more later—"Why, we [those in "black studies"] even have our Norton Anthology of African American Literature!"⁴ A mixed blessing, as I'm sure Baker means to tell us by his tone. We in

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