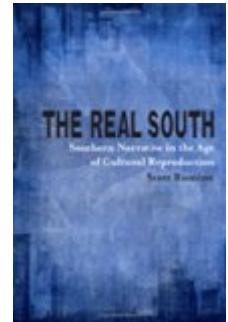


Scott Romine. *The Real South: Southern Narrative in the Age of Cultural Reproduction.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008. x + 284 pp. \$42.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8071-3329-3.



Reviewed by Christopher Bundrick

Published on H-Southern-Lit (June, 2012)

Commissioned by Anthony Dyer Hoefer (George Mason University)

The main issue that Scott Romine explores in *The Real South* is what it takes to understand the South in what he calls the "age of cultural reproduction." Tipping his hat to Walter Benjamin's landmark essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Romine makes it clear that the real problem is understanding the South as the basis of a singular cultural identity within the broader context of an era that is "increasingly dominated by mass media, global corporations, and the logic of commodification." (p. 2).[1] In short, Romine proposes to look at the process of cultural identification within a system that defines identity less through tradition and history and more through consumption and corporate brands--something he refers to as our age of "reproductions, counterfeits, and simulacra" (p. 2).

This book is clearly concerned with ideas of authenticity, and Romine's sense of how to understand what "authentic" means is, unlike some studies of the subject, subtle and layered; the real South, as he sees it, is not a single set of cultural identifiers so much as "a set of anxious, transient,

even artificial intersections, sutures, or common surfaces between two concepts [i.e., the imaginary and the real] that are themselves remarkably fluid" (pp. 2-3). "My concern," he continues in the same fluid trope, "is with the ink ... that has been spilled over (or *on* or *in the fissures* of) precisely those intersections and surfaces in an effort to understand late southern cultures, as inflected by or colliding with other 'kinds' of culture ... without reiterating some imaginary division between them and culture 'proper'" (p. 3, emphasis in original). Indicating the way this work fits with some of his earlier ideas, Romine suggests that the most "fantastic narrative form" can play an important role in the creation, dissemination, evolution, and memorialization of southern culture (p. 26). In addition to connecting with readers familiar with his earlier monograph about the creation of southern culture, these ideas specifically move the focus of *The Real South* away from the fixed ideas of a South that exists within the static frames of tradition and memory and toward the more interesting versions of the South that we

find on the borders and between the frames, where the culture evolves, adapts, and resists.

Chapter 1 focuses on Tara, Scarlett O'Hara's plantation home in *Gone with the Wind* (1936). One of the central artifacts of a wide range of southern cultures, Tara "constitutes a persistent seam between an idealized South and a material one" (p. 27). Tara is at the center of not only Margaret Mitchell's novel but also a network of signs that Romine sees as acting out the "commodification of southern culture" (p. 28). As a fetish of the South, Tara represents a South that exists in a particular intersection of history and geography, a place where southern culture can exist outside of time and can be immune to the influences of other cultures. "The crucial narrative work performed by *Gone with the Wind* is to sever desire from social regulation," and in the process, Romine argues, Mitchell trades the "stable system of exchange located in material things" for "a set of increasingly speculative and flexible 'socio-economic' investments" (pp. 29, 31). Put simply, Romine reads Tara as a location primed both to support a particular fantasy about what the South is and to help it remain untouched by the forces of progress. While the postbellum world in which Mitchell's novel is set focuses on an "emerging cultural economy," Romine emphasizes that Tara is where Mitchell's "real South" can remain insulated from the new world materializing all around it. He complicates this otherwise oversimplified reading, however, by pointing out that, as the site where this fantasy of a static and immortal South is produced, Tara ventures into the performance of cultural work in a way that demonstrates the impossibility of the kind of fixed southern culture that it imagines. Building on Scarlet's oft-quoted assertion that "tomorrow is another day," Romine positions Tara not as a monument to the South that will never change, but rather as a site that "rescues the old ways from an inaccessible yesterday and relocates them to an inaccessible tomorrow" (p. 40). Doing so might protect the plantation and the Old South myths that reside

with it, but this also creates a paradox in the sense that the plantation must become a site of cultural reproduction, actively engaging with the social marketplace in order to continue to propel its sense of the South into the future.

Comparing Tony Horwitz's *Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War* (1998) with V. S. Naipaul's *A Turn in the South* (1989), in chapter 2 Romine claims that both books are "archeological" in the sense that they strip away surface strata of southern identity in order to get at what Romine calls "the chthonic substructure of some more fundamental culture" (p. 62). Planting this idea of a South within the earth--the repository of truth and value that Scarlett O'Hara's father so cherished--and remaining aloof to outside influence brings Romine's argument circling back to a sense of the authentic South that chapter 1 denies. Such is the power of the culture factory that *Gone with the Wind* has become that Romine's argument must work against its own attempts to make us forget that Scarlett's South is a fabrication serving a specific idea driven by imperatives concerning racial, class, and gender hierarchies. Instead he must argue over--literally--the same ground.

Chapter 3, "Real/Black/South: Roots, Seams, and Cultural Reproduction," addresses racial identities and southern culture. It is interesting, but not entirely unexpected, that the chapter most focused on race is also the one in which Romine most directly addresses the way the "real" South is simply a made-up identity that "becomes the real South through the intervention of narrative" (p. 9). To illustrate his sense of the fluidity of both regional and racial identities, Romine offers a new reading of Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" (1973). The classic reading of this text revolves around the idea that Dee's newfound appreciation of her heritage and the objects that represent it is somehow superficial and false; however, Romine contends that "if the pleasures of repetition and continuity characterize the mother's relation to culture

and her subsequent antipathy toward Dee, this relationship also encloses the mother within a static environment" (p. 180). In other words, Dee may be wrong about how to use the quilts, but in Romine's estimate, Mama and Maggie also fail due to their inability to "integrate a narrative of culture roots with an improvisational and dynamic engagement with the present" (p. 120). Romine's bravery in suggesting (however obliquely) that Dee's behavior might not be improper is something that we should not fail to recognize, but beyond that, Romine's point--that once we accept that cultural identities are necessarily complex and dynamic, we must also acknowledge that no single subject position within the constellation of possibilities can be set apart as authentic without relegating the entire culture to stultification and irrelevance--is absolutely indispensable.

Chapter 4 focuses on Lewis Nordan's *Wolf Whistle* (1993), a fictional account of the events surrounding Emmett Till's murder. Arguing for the correspondence "between dead history and dead bodies" toward the end of the chapter, Romine's larger point is that the truth of a figure like Till becomes less rather than more fixed as time passes (p. 149). The authentic South, which previous chapters suggest is impossible to find, also poses such a problem because the stories that define it keep retelling themselves--refusing to stick with one version. There is an odd, sometimes uncomfortable similarity between Romine's sense of Till's story and his sense of how the Till story weighs in on the question of southern culture. Till's murder, he argues (not without considerable precedent), was an attempt to redraw the social boundaries that limited black expression to a specific corner of the 1950s South whose main priority was to maintain a social order built around white hegemony. "Bobo violates the scripts," Romine writes of the Till character in Nordan's retelling, so the community finds a way to remove him (p. 142). But the scripts are both complex and vast. Even the stories other characters tell about Bobo should, of course, follow the script, but

Romine is quick to point out that some of them rewrite it. Riffing off William Faulkner's famous pronouncement that "the past is never dead. It's not even past," Romine suggests that the past is never silent and the building cacophony of stories told out of the past deny any attempt to settle on one authorized version of history or culture, leaving every version both available and contingent.

Moving away from Nordan's Mississippi Delta, chapter 5 deals with Bobbie Ann Mason's *Shiloh and Other Stories* (1982) and James Wilcox's Tula Springs novels. But even their versions of western Kentucky and suburban Louisiana, Romine is quick to highlight, can be shifty. After summarizing the dilemma that he believes both Mason and Wilcox face in their attempts to render versions of the South that are "strip malls and fast food," as opposed to the "hemispheric, global, postcolonial South" that he claims New Southern Studies advocates call for, the chapter asks the obviously rhetorical question, "How, then, to map the mass South?" Borrowing from Richard Godden, Romine provides an answer, suggesting that the mass South "emerges as a crucial site of deregulation [in which] authenticity is legible only as loss" (p. 156). Interesting as it is, this approach feels awfully similar to the first chapter's attempts to wrestle with Mitchell's eight-hundred-pound, white-columned gorilla. Mason's and Wilcox's versions of the South find home to be "always relative and always at a slight distance," Romine claims at the end of the chapter, yet isn't this very similar to Scarlett O'Hara's sense of Tara? This is not to say, however, that chapter 5 gets it wrong so much as overestimates the extent to which it has exorcised the ghost of *Gone with the Wind* in chapter 1. The plantation house--that plantation house in particular--seems to be a feature of any southern landscape, and Tara's lingering but unacknowledged presence in this argument undermines but also, interestingly, underscores Romine's point about how the dead continue to speak. In the closing lines of the first chapter Romine states, "Tara reproduces culture across

historical and economic ruptures," and I would add that this process is so fully viral, such a fundamental part of the study of southern culture, that it replicates itself throughout this entire book, attempting to overwrite itself, to one degree or another, onto every version of the South that Romine tries to examine (p. 59).

Chapter 6 also looks at a deregulated system, but instead of the boundaries of a map, it is the lines of familial connection that Barry Hannah's *Yonder Stands Your Orphan* (2001) and Josephine Humphreys's *Rich in Love* (1987) redraw. Each book depicts a kind of homesickness, Romine argues, but not for a real place so much as a social field in which it is possible to arrange desirable simulations. Outside of any sort of traditional family structure, Hannah's Man Morton is "a duplicate who wants to be an original," but the genuine identity he longs for, Romine points out, was never there in the first place (p. 201). Morton has internalized the reproduction of a cultural ideal to such a degree that he is incapable of seeing it for what it is. The map of Hannah's Eagle Lake, Mississippi, is ultimately held together by "an economy of artificial gratifications" but lacking the genuine reproduction that real families would provide (p. 207). Humphreys also examines the breakdown of family, but in her work the family fails not because the lines connecting them break down but because the frames that would otherwise give them shape and structure do. Romine zeroes in on the way Lucille Odom from *Rich in Love* uses the term "habitat" to describe where she lives. For her, Romine suggests, all places fall neatly into one of two categories: real or artificial. This strict division does not hold up to even slight scrutiny, however, and so all the places that Lucille understands to be habitats become threatened by a very literal sense of unreality. As one might imagine, this vision of space gradually deteriorates until Lucille has difficulty distinguishing between the tourist traps of her native Charleston and the *genuine* places those constructed spaces mimic. In both cases (Man Morton's and Lucille

Odom's) the real issue that Romine seems to be addressing is how the desire for some sort of authentic sense of identity and location will always be at odds with the inevitable processes through which places and identities change.

The concluding chapter, subtitled "A Circular Conclusion," explores the ramifications of understanding the South as post-authentic. Opening with a brief discussion of Padgett Powell's *Edisto* (1984), Romine points out that a "recursive return to the South persists throughout" and that the book "continually meditates on the preservation and destruction of southern territories" (p. 226). But the very notion of southern territory is the thing Romine has been trying to complicate throughout this project. Borrowing from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Romine tells us that these attempts to reappropriate southern spaces are really "projects mobilized against the abstracting and deterritorializing pressures of postmodern capital" (p. 229). While capital certainly seems like an apt metaphor for the sort of exchange that southern culture (all cultures, for that matter) practices, I find Romine's notion of the liquidation of culture especially complex and interesting. This approach renders the recursive pattern of cultural evolution into a legible system where culture serves as a commodity, the value of which changes relative to its position within a network of exchange. By its very nature, it denies precedent to any singular version of the South. Instead, relying on an ongoing series of corrections to redefine the exchange between meaning, tradition, the present, past, and future, Romine's model fashions the South as less of a definable place and more as a field in which different ideas about place may interact with and substitute each other. Recognizing it as "a site of negotiation and mutual navigation," this method's denial of a "solid South" might seem to doom southern studies, but I believe this tactic not only extends the relevance of southern studies and ultimately promises to

sharpen our sense of what the South is (pp. 236-237).

Note

[1]. Walter Benjamin, "Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 217-253.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-southern-lit>

Citation: Christopher Bundrick. Review of Romine, Scott. *The Real South: Southern Narrative in the Age of Cultural Reproduction*. H-Southern-Lit, H-Net Reviews. June, 2012.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=36051>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.