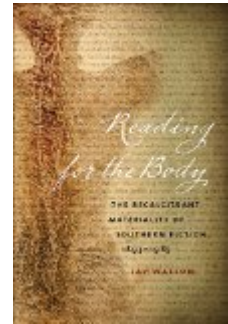


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jay Watson. *Reading for the Body: The Recalcitrant Materiality of Southern Fiction, 1893-1985*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012. x + 412 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-4336-5; \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8203-4338-9.

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## Reading the Corpus of Southern Literature

When Houston A. Baker and Dana D. Nelson invited the advancement of a “new Southern studies,” their invitation first emphasized the body. The preface to their coedited special issue of *American Literature* making this call is, after all, entitled “Violence, the Body and ‘the South,’” and in it they clarify their particular interest in exploring how and why certain bodies in “the South” were idealized, some made grotesque, and others made to perpetrate violence upon still other bodies. Their preface also encourages scholars to imagine “the South” to include much more than the typical geographic and cultural boundaries of southeastern U.S. white masculinity.[1] This is the line of inquiry along which the New Southern Studies developed. Several book-length studies and collections have appeared that orient the U.S. South within a global context, and a second special issue of *American Literature* published in 2006, edited by Kathryn McKee and Annette Trefzer, calls for further exploration of this terrain. Other more recent books, such as Scott Romine’s *The Real South* (2008) and Michael Kreyling’s *The South That Wasn’t There* (2010), investigate the tension between authentic, imagined, and remembered Souths within these contexts and how one might even define such a troubling region within the larger, global framework of the New Southern Studies.

Jay Watson, however, wants us to return to bodies. In his expansive book, *Reading for the Body*, Watson embarks on the correction of what he sees as a vulnerability in scholarship on the U.S. South: its tendency toward

“over-intellectualization and over-idealization” (p. 21). Despite the fact that embodied portrayals of the South, its culture, and its inhabitants abound in literature, journalism, and political discourse from the colonial period through the twentieth century, which he surveys in his introduction, Watson submits that scholars have been too long hung up on the mind—the mind Henry Adams thought southerners did not have and that Agrarians and W. J. Cash competed to define. Building on the work of Patricia Yeager, Ann Goodwyn Jones, and Susan Donaldson, among others, Watson, using the tools of material culture theory and social history developed by such theorists as Karl Marx, Luce Irigaray, and Elaine Scarry, argues that our understanding of the South’s literature and culture must reincorporate consideration of the work completed by bodies and the depictions of such bodies. Acknowledging that this work, indeed, returns to Baker and Nelson’s call to explore the relationship between literature, the body, and the South, Watson’s introduction orients this undertaking within both the New Southern Studies and work by American studies scholars identifying the South as home to a body politic through (and against) which national citizenship, race, and gender could be defined, investigated, and represented. Rather than defining the South by examining what authors and their characters *think* about it, *Reading for the Body* interrogates somatic reifications of the region’s paradigms and uncovers subjectivities struggling to understand the world through their corporeal existence.

In a sign of the book's own recalcitrant commitment to underscoring materiality, the introduction actually begins with a convincing, well-grounded (historically and critically) close reading of Jean Toomer's "Portrait in Georgia" from *Cane* (1923) as a lynching postcard to demonstrate the project's methodology before explaining the project's rationale and intellectual underpinnings. The remainder of the book is organized into two parts covering fiction by an array of authors in individual chapters and a coda. Watson expertly adapts his critical toolkit to each work addressed, identifying important nuances within each author's representations of materiality.

Part 1 of the book features close readings of parts of the body in southern fiction. The first chapter on *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1893) is perhaps the book's strongest. Watson identifies Mark Twain's novel as a site of convergence for modern anxieties in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America about transient identities, alienation from one's own body, and racial difference after emancipation. Watson locates these anxieties' nexus in the novel's investigation of hands and the work they complete, and shows how hands can identify and betray their owners. The chapter foregrounds the tension at the time between the art of palmistry and the emerging forensic science of fingerprinting, correlating it with Twain's documented interest in both and the novel's whodunit and the chilling prospect for the people of Dawson's Landing that they could not visually perceive the racial difference of the imposter Tom Driscoll (actually the son of the Driscoll family slave, Roxana, who was switched at birth). The subsequent chapter on Zora Neale Hurston also turns on "companion technology," pairing the disembodied voices of modern sound reproduction technology with the embodied voices of the protagonists in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934) and *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939). Watson argues that in the former, Jonah's voice operates as a phonograph, affecting "meticulous reproductions of the sound field of black modernity in the U.S. South," while Hurston's modern Moses conflates his nation-building voice with the work of radio broadcast and amplification in the early twentieth century (p. 89). The third chapter on *Light in August* (1932) is a bloody affair. Watson contends that the novel's bloodshed may be read as a "subversive commentary" on the nineteenth-century ideas about the origins of race and the sensibility among white southerners that "blood tells" regarding race, even as there were anxieties about being able to recognize African Americans as they began to migrate at the beginning of the twentieth century (pp. 142-

143). Touching on the same anxieties about race as he did in his reading of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and relating the blood/race discourse to the 1990s blood/AIDS discourse, Watson concludes not only that the brutal murder and castration of Joe Christmas marks him as the individual in which artistic representation of race and gender and violence collide, but also that the sickened reaction of Jefferson's white folks shows that reading race and gender into blood has its limits.

The book's second part emphasizes the embodied experiences. In its first chapter, Watson takes up Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* (1940), a book containing what he calls "fables of embodiment, of southern black bodies in pain," arguing that the physical burdens of Wright's characters completes theoretical work for understanding pain as a destructive and creative force within the black experience—a point untouched in Scarry's work (pp. 159-160). Watson traces ubiquitous pain through all the stories of the volume and identifies its revolutionary possibilities in the sacrificing acts of characters, such as Silas and Sue. Turning the page to another short fiction writer, Watson deftly uses Katherine Anne Porter's "Miranda stories" to posit a "difficult embodiment," a term he intends to be more inclusive of (and in no way oversimplifying) the illnesses, conditions, "sometimes even painfully embodied experiences that go hand in hand with female sexual and reproductive health," and coming of age for women in the South (p. 217). Watson elucidates how Porter, who shared many of the same somatic experiences of her characters, deploys difficult embodiment in her short fiction to subvert the plantation's disembodied, idealized, and romanticized white femininity, especially in "The Old Order" (appearing complete 1965) and "Old Morality" (1937). The chapter concludes with a reading of the Spanish influenza pandemic in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" (1939) as an illness manifesting in Miranda's difficult embodiment that connects romance and war. The final chapter proper, another of the book's strong chapters, tackles Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country* (1985) and considers how stories of war can authentically convey the "body's felt reality" on the battlefield (p. 266). Following Sam Hughes's attempt to understand the Vietnam War first through conversations and an intimate relationship with veterans, then her father's diary, then attempting to relive the boonies in the Kentucky wilderness, and finally visiting the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Watson explains the problematic relationship that women have with war because of their bodies: it both precludes them from any physical or leadership role in war, yet also "militarizes"

them as “embodiments of what male soldiers must fight to protect” (p. 287).

*Reading for the Body* ends with a coda in which Watson employs Walker Percy’s *Lancelot* (1977) as a caveat (Percy himself described the novel as a “small cautionary tale”[2]). In probing another whodunit that recalls the bodily evidence of identity explored in the first chapter, Watson suggests that Lance’s reduction of his wife, her lover, and their cohorts to their bodies only is a case of carrying attention to corporeal concerns too far—a danger Percy was well equipped to be aware of given his training as a medical doctor.

Attempting to refocus the critical conversation on so many frequently addressed figures is ambitious. Still, in *Reading for the Body*, Watson makes a substantial case for applying somatic methodologies to each author addressed, and he suggests many others whose work could have been included. The book emphasizes fiction, and Watson briefly explains that such is the case because he wished to explore the sustained narratives of novels and stories “for the potential they offer for deep imaginative engagement” (p. 24) (in contrast, poetry was

the playground of the Agrarians; in that light, beginning this endeavor with fiction seems appropriate). Ultimately, *Reading for the Body* grants warranted attention to the rich materiality in southern fiction that has been at times overshadowed by the South’s intellectual history; “Southern bodies, after all,” Watson argues, “are where southern ideas, including ideas of and about the South itself, ultimately happen” (p. 21). Foregoing the body to privilege ideological and intellectual constructions of the South obscures our relationship to our material world and our own bodies. Given how unavoidable bodies are in the current election year’s discourses about war, voter identification laws, women’s reproductive rights, and marriage equality, Watson’s study is quite timely and important.

#### Notes

[1]. Houston A. Baker and Dana D. Nelson, “Preface: Violence, the Body and ‘The South,’” *American Literature* 73, no. 2 (2001): 232-233.

[2]. Walker Percy. “Questions They Never Asked Me,” in *Signposts in a Strange Land* (New York: Picador, 1991), 410.

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