

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jon Smith. *Finding Purple America: The South and the Future of American Cultural Studies*. The New Southern Studies Series. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013. 208 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-3321-2; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8203-4526-0.

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## Growing up: Boomers, Hipsters, GenXers, and the New Southern Studies

A look at the table of contents of Jon Smith's long-awaited book *Finding Purple America: The South and the Future of American Cultural Studies* reveals a broad range of topics in the cultural studies register. Quite a bit of the book is dedicated to music—from Johnny Cash to Neko Case. Other parts theorize fashion—from wearing vintage to Ratliff's ties in William Faulkner's *The Mansion* (1959). There are chapters that move swiftly from the politics of German post-Holocaust "Aufarbeitung" to the fundamentalist Right on American and southern home-ground. There is plenty on the identity politics of hipsters and boomers and GenXers. There are observations on marketing theory and the re-branding of the U.S. South; there is an engagement with the global and the local South, the urban and the rural, and everything in between. You see, the book spins out topical threads in so many different directions, that readers may ask, what holds them together?

Though cultural studies surely may be capacious—even Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler and Lawrence Grossberg observed two decades ago that "no list can constrain the topics cultural studies may address in the future" and described the field as beholden to no one particular methodology—it involves in some practitioners "considerable self-interrogation" (p. 6).[1] *Finding Purple America* certainly fits with this agenda as Smith is interested in the academy's self-sustaining practices and politics, particularly those of American studies and southern studies. With the introductory question, "What does an American

Studies Scholar Want?" Smith begins this disciplinary self-interrogation within the context of psychoanalysis. Discarding the Freudian framework for a Lacanian one, Smith reformulates the question to ask "what is the *objet a* of American studies? What is it that we take pleasure in continually circling without ever achieving?" (p. 3). His answer is that whereas American studies is heavily invested in a liberal "crisis fantasy" about the future, traditional southern studies, by contrast, is rooted in a fantasy about the past. Positioned on opposite ends of a dialectic, each end "stuck" in unproductive "old forms of enjoyment"—on the one hand, celebrations of radicalism; on the other hand, celebrations of memory—this construction of a political binary allows Smith to position himself as a "relative outsider" to both fields. The goal of the book, he writes, is to "help break an impasse, not to establish a new order" (p. 6).

*Finding Purple America* makes two main moves: whereas the first part is purposefully entitled "Disrupting Everyone's Enjoyment" (surprised, anybody? ), the second, "Reconciliations with Modernity," attempts to "reconcile" the opening move in an attempt at creating a critical dialectic. Methodologically, the first part of the book works explicitly within a Lacanian framework as it retraces some of Slavoj Žižek's now familiar exploits of popular culture in *Looking Awry* (1992) and draws on his essays on melancholy and loss. Smith applies this framework to his own "contrarian takes" on country music, the religious Right, and Gen X music, in this order. The

line-up of the first three chapters makes the book read like a collection of essays, each bringing forth its own hero—Johnny Cash, Jürgen Habermas, and Neko Case—and characterizing that hero as an individual attempting to “synthesize the demands of change and continuity and, as best as they can behave rationally, rather than narcissistically, in a world of other people” (p. 23). This surprising turn toward what Habermas calls “communicative rationality” in Smith’s overall Lacanian framework runs the risk of employing a methodology that may work against the goals of an argument about the unattainable object of desire. Smith argues that Tacoma, Washington, singer Neko Case has essentially managed to get out of the circling around the *objet a* by finding pleasure not in old rock star youth fantasies, but in grown-up “everyday life” (p. 86). His in-depth analysis of her musical career grounds a demographically anchored argument about cultural change that will be of interest especially to music critics and cultural studies readers. In fact, Smith devotes more pages to a discussion of Case than to his comparative analysis of southern and German cultures of loss, a much more capacious and complicated subject. Here the book moves too quickly and takes some shortcuts so that Habermas and Alexander Mitscherlich’s work on postwar Germany comes to us largely filtered through Eric Santner.

The second part of the book focuses on marketing theory and consumer culture, specifically the marketing and branding of the U.S. South, its public spaces, and its people. As a scholar who so sharply delineates the ideologies and methodologies of American studies versus southern studies, and old southern studies versus new southern studies, and who so frankly slots scholars into their respective camps (and age groups!), Smith surprises readers when he calls for a “modern ambivalence” of identity categories, and a “both/and sensibility” that will not result in “mediocrity” (p. 19). For him, this new sensibility arises from understanding and “loving” a place like Birmingham, Alabama, neither futuristic like Los Angeles nor quaint like Mayberry, but a place that combines the urban and the rural in the productive tension of a complex alternative modernity. A place like that inspires “new structures of feeling,” and in offering hybridities helps shatter our disciplinary fantasies of regional and national exceptionalism. It is in the paragraphs on Birmingham in the second part of the book and in the concluding chapter, “In the Garden,” that Smith waxes poetic in a paen to a place. What connects the two parts of the study is Smith’s continued interest in exploring the temporal-

ity of modernity, a here and now, neither futuristic nor backward looking.

*Finding Purple America* is most interesting in its range of topics; it is strongest when it performs actual cultural analysis whether analyzing the TV show *American Idol*, the ads in *Parade* magazine, or the botanical landscape of his own garden. It is quick-witted and fast moving and often purposefully provocative and contradictory. But the hyperconsciousness about academic battles and personalities and quibbles with individual scholars (especially in the introduction) gets in the way of the explicitly articulated goal of a study that desires the breaking of a theoretical and disciplinary “impasse” between boomer and hipster politics and aesthetics, and older and younger generations of scholars in various neighboring disciplines.

If autobiography is part of the story that *Finding Purple America* wants to tell (and I think it is), then this book is one scholar’s search for new patterns of scholarly and personal identification. Responding to the self-positioning strategies of Tara McPherson, Houston Baker, and Patricia Yaeger in which Smith reads a danger of re-inscribing essentialist southern identities, he desires a subject position “both unreified and in line with the argument of the book,” that speaks of a modern ambivalence toward self and place (p. 18). This object of his desire—Smith’s *objet a*—which takes shape within the margins of his discourse produces a “surplus,” that something extra that remains and haunts our being. Referencing Jacques Lacan, Smith writes, “we derive pleasure from getting all worked up about our desire,” and what we are ultimately afraid of is “losing the excitation in us” (p. 3); it may be precisely this anxiety that drives the tone and argument style of portions of this book. Having given voice to this fear in the stylistic antagonisms of the introduction, the study then moves on to seek “communicative rationality” and ends by concluding that “it is not a matter of choosing sides” (p. 135), thus completing a trajectory that ultimately points toward “maturity” in its timely quest for more productive patterns of disciplinary politics, regional identity, and the future of American cultural studies.

#### Note

[1]. Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler, and Lawrence Grossberg, “Cultural Studies: An Introduction,” in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Nelson, Treichler, and Grossberg (New York: Routledge, 1992), 1.

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