Senses of the South

Géraldine Chouard et Jacques Pothier
Tell about the South. What it’s like there. What do they do there. Why do they live there. Why do they live at all. (*Absalom, Absalom!,* 142)

1 Exiled in the Massachusetts winter, Southerner Quentin Compson finds himself repeatedly assaulted by the uncomprehending inquisitiveness of his fellow students. As his roommate, a Canadian, collaborates with him telling fact from legend about the larger than life legendary figure of Thomas Sutpen, he tries to get a sense of the region:

   What is it? Something you live and breathe in like air? A kind of vacuum filled with wraithlike and indomitable anger and pride and glory at and in happenings that occurred and ceased fifty years ago? (*Absalom, Absalom!,* 289)

2 Over twenty years ago, in “William Faulkner: à vue de nez”, Paul Carmignani focused on the sense of smell in Faulkner by emphasizing that while due attention had been paid to the senses of gazing and hearing, the other three senses deserved as much attention.

3 Countless attempts have been made to make sense of Southern Identity, or *The Mind of the South*, to use Wilbur Cash’s title. As 2011 marked the 150th anniversary of the outset of the Civil War, scholars are still wrestling to define the American South, still “telling about the South.” A more sensual approach to the issue of race relations at the heart of the Southern contradiction has been tried in this century, with groundbreaking studies such as Patricia Yaeger’s *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women’s Writing, 1930-1990* or Mark M. Smith’s *How Race is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses*, an awareness that now finds its expression in mainstream fiction, as the runaway success of Kathryn Stockett’s *The Help*, a novel haunted by the sensory exclusion of black women who remain at the same time the most accomplished standard bearers of Southern cuisine. No stronger example could be found of the fascinating reversibility of the most repulsive and the most delicious.

4 In *The Awakening* (1899), Kate Chopin focuses on the sense of taste and uses foodways to define and transgress the social and cultural boundaries of acceptable female behavior as well as to reinscribe woman’s identity through the culinary dimension of her heroine’s life. In “The Gastrodynamics of Edna Pontellier’s liberation,” Urszula Niewiadomska-Flis
analyses how the liberating exposure to the Creole culture allows Edna Pontellier to assert her agency through culinary practices and how, in general, her journey to self-knowledge is framed through food experiences.

5 Another type of displacement, geographic this time, is analysed simultaneously with hearing in Louis Mazzari’s article, “Key to the highway: blues records and the great migration,” which looks at the way the Delta blues was a musical travel narrative for tens of thousands of people who were leaving the rural South for an unknown, modern and industrial future. His paper explores blues music as an expression of the fluidity of African American society and culture during the Great Depression.

6 Examining how Eudora Welty’s observations lead to her senses of smell, touch, and sound in the stories “June Recital” and “Moon Lake” and “The Demonstrators,” selected letters and her comments on her photographs, mostly taken in the 1930s, Pearl McHaney argues in “Eudora Welty: Sensing the Particular, Revealing the Universal in Her Southern World” that Welty pictures the invisible by her use of the senses, creating a sense of the South that is simultaneously particular and universal.

7 In “Tennessee Williams’s post-pastoral Southern gardens in text and on the movie screen”, Taïna Tuhkunen looks at how the southern states are depicted in film adaptations of five plays by Mississippi-born playwright Tennessee Williams: A Streetcar Named Desire, Baby Doll (Elia Kazan, 1951 & 1956), Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (Richard Brooks, 1958), Suddenly Last Summer (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1959) and The Night of the Iguana (John Huston, 1964). Referring to the idea of the pastoral garden developed by Leo Marx in The Machine in the Garden (1964), her article highlights Williams’ irreverent representation of the paradigmatic southern garden and takes a close look at the way the 20th century cinema sought to recreate it as a corrupt place.

8 Similar to the tragedy and aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the yellow fever outbreaks which devastated New Orleans during the 19th century were also due, in part, to the city’s geographical location and the politics of interested parties. In “‘Magic Portraits Drawn by the Sun’: New Orleans, Yellow Fever, and the Sense(s) of Death in Josh Russell’s Yellow Jack”, Owen Robinson focuses on the novel Yellow Jack by Josh Russell (1999), which paints a complex portrait of this city, its epidemics and its contradictory stories. It examines how the fusing of fiction with an important historical period for the city provides a sophisticated study on the role of visual representation for documenting such horrors whose prose is deeply rooted in the smells and sounds of time and place.

9 In Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics (1999), cultural critic bell hooks argues that “no one seems to know how to tell the story” of white men romantically involved with slave women because long ago another story supplanted it: “that story, invented by white men, is about the overwhelming desperate longing black men have to sexually violate the bodies of white women.” In “Jefferson and Hemings in Paris: The South and the Power of the Senses”, Suzanne Jones explores Barbara Chase-Riboud’s novel Sally Hemings (1979), the Merchant-Ivory-Jhablava film Jefferson in Paris (1995), the Haid-Andrews TV movie Sally Hemings: An American Scandal (2000), and Annette Gordon-Reed’s new family history, The Hemingses of Monticello (2008), and postulates a few answers to the questions most often posed about the Jefferson-Hemings liaison.
BIBLIOGRAPHIE


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