the changing profession

Screening the Twenty-First-Century South

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OUR UNDERSTANDINGS OF EARLY MOMENTS OF SOUTHERN LITERATURE AND CULTURE SHARE SOME COMMON FRAMEWORKS. REPRESENtations (including self-representations) of the South in the nineteenth century, for example, revolve largely around plantation slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction. Similarly, we might think about the twentieth-century South as defined by Jim Crow segregation, the outmigration of blacks and working-class whites, and the civil rights movement and its aftermath. What are the issues, then, that structure the twenty-first-century southern imaginary? To what extent does it make sense to talk about "the South" as a unified conceptual, ideological, or geographic place? What does it mean to read, watch, listen to, study, and teach southern literature and culture in the twenty-first century? What do we mean by the terms *southern* and *literature*? What cultural forms and media are central to understanding twenty-first-century southern culture? What is the utility of the literary? How do southern literature and culture relate to the nation as a whole?

As we set out to answer these questions, we should consider the fact that the contemporary media landscape, especially television, is overrun with representations of the South, from the occasionally sublime and sometimes infuriating (SEC football, *True Detective*) to the ridiculous (*Duck Dynasty*) to the unspeakably horrible (*Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*). These programs often depict the South—the rural South in particular—as a freak show. At the same time, well-worn stereotypes help obscure the complex relations between southern people, places, and situations on the one hand and the media industries that traffic in and profit from their representations on the other.

My first suggestion, then, is that we and our students should watch more television, more critically. While we may cringe as we do so, and while television viewers across the nation laugh, we should pay attention to *Duck Dynasty*, a so-called reality-television show featuring the Robertsons, a West Monroe, Louisiana, family. The show's fundamental conceit is to disguise the workings of capital beneath the spectacle of redneck buffoonery. The family's wealth derived initially from Duck

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Commander, their highly successful duck-call business. As the show's popularity increased, though, the Robertsons' main product became stereotyped, commodified versions of themselves—hugely successful capitalist entrepreneurs masquerading as backwoods hicks. As I write this, talks are apparently under way to adapt Will and Korie Robertsons' memoir (itself part of the marketing machinery of the show) into a Broadway-style Las Vegas musical, bringing this hillbilly minstrel show to the literal stage (Healy). Or, as Lindy West succinctly puts it, "*Duck Dynasty* Musical Will Bring Anus-Obsessed Racism to the Stage." Would such a production warrant our critical attention? Or does the stage adaptation of the television program simply represent another facet of the commodification and marketing of the Robertsons' media personae, like the thousands of *Duck Dynasty*–branded items at Walmart? Is this commodification the central story of southern culture today?

The political and material realities of the Louisiana in which the Robertsons thrive need to be acknowledged. Louisiana, along with its Gulf Coast neighbors, has long ranked near the bottom of quality-of-life metrics measuring poverty, public health, support for education, and so on. Louisiana ranked forty-sixth in the Social Science Research Council's 2014 Opportunity Index ("Opportunity Index"), and second only to Alaska in firearm-related deaths ("Number"). Having grown up in rural Louisiana, I am both intrigued by and wary of the fact that it has become a common setting for film and television, including prestige programming like the first season of HBO's *True Detective* and lowbrow fare like *Duck Dynasty*. The fact that Louisiana offers generous tax incentives to film and television productions, coupled with low labor costs and an almost total lack of regulation, largely accounts for this popularity. The state subsidized each episode of *Duck Dynasty* in 2014 to the tune of over $300,000 (Russell); more than eighty episodes have been filmed so far, and the subsidy was set to increase to over $400,000 per episode in 2015 (Newkirk). As Sonia Saraiya puts it, "The Robertsons are making money from the state of Louisiana . . . for presenting a highly politicized view of what it means to be Southern. Specifically, the clan of 'Duck Dynasty' offers the posture of ignorance—the blissful state of overlooking a principality that is figuratively and literally falling to pieces." The investments at stake in *Duck Dynasty*, then, are not only representational and ideological but financial and political.

Indeed, these literal and figurative investments in the show mirror political and financial disinvestments in education, healthcare, and infrastructure. Louisiana's governor, Bobby Jindal, is a staunch supporter of the Robertsons and *Duck Dynasty*. He shared a stage at the 2014 Republican Leadership Conference in New Orleans with Phil Robertson, the family's patriarch, who had recently caused a media furor with inflammatory comments in an interview with *GQ* about homosexuality and the supposed contentment of "the blacks" in pre-civil-rights-era Louisiana (Magary). In 2015 Jindal's tax policies produced a $1.6 billion budget deficit that brought Louisiana's public-university systems to the brink of financial insolvency, while protecting the more than $200 million in tax money earmarked for film and television subsidies (Newkirk). The Robertsons returned the favor, endorsing Jindal's presidential candidacy. (Jindal later signed legislation capping the subsidies at $180 million, after the state's Department of Economic Development concluded that the subsidies' rate of return was twenty-three cents on the dollar [Johnson].) While this bread-and-circuses approach to governance is by no means confined to Louisiana or the South, it surely pervades the region, and it is impossible to understand the cultural appeal of *Duck Dynasty* without considering the show's implication in larger social, political, and economic concerns. By the same token, the cultural and political prominence

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of the show and its participants reveals as irresponsible both the understandable desire of scholarly critics to ignore the whole sordid spectacle and students' predictable protestations that the show is merely entertainment.

Given its complex narrative structure and self-conscious literariness, *True Detective* is perhaps a more likely candidate for critical attention from scholars of southern literature than is *Duck Dynasty*. Nic Pizzolatto, its showrunner and primary writer, is the author of *Galveston* (2010), a southern noir novel set on the Gulf Coast. From New Orleans, he attended Lousiana State University and the University of Arkansas; though he lives in California (where the show's incomprehensible and near universally panned second season is set), he certainly qualifies as a southern writer. While little academic scholarship has been published on it, the show's first season received plenty of media attention, much of it smart and perceptive. As I prepare to teach the series in an undergraduate seminar in southern literature, though, I find myself preoccupied by the first season's last two episodes, in which the show's philosophical and metaphysical questioning (or hooey, depending on whom you ask) dissolves into a disappointing and troubling reversion to stereotypes of incestuous, murderous hillbillies, à la *Deliverance* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* ("After You've Gone" and "Form"). To what do we attribute the persistence and apparent power of these decades-old tropes? How can southern literature get out of this rut? *Duck Dynasty* and *True Detective* are not simply southern self-representations. Instead, they are negotiations of southern self-identification (on the part of the Robertsons and Pizzolatto, respectively) with long-standing stereotyped media representations of southerners.

As Michael Bibler points out in his introduction to this collection of essays, both southerners and nonsoutherners remain invested in forms of southern exceptionalism. At the same time, the South is an integral part of the national media landscape. Take, for example, Atlanta's Turner Broadcasting Systems, parent company of CNN and Adult Swim, among other national media properties. What difference does it make if we consider the late-night cartoons on Adult Swim or FX's *Archer* as products of southern culture? These programs eschew stereotypes of the South (except for *Squidbillies*, which revels in and wryly mocks them),[1] yet they nonetheless are products of the contemporary South.

The seventh edition of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, published in 2007, included a section entitled "Writing in a Time of Terror: September 11, 2001." Here, the anthology suggested, was a crucial historical event, a national trauma around which a twenty-first-century American literary history could be written. By the eighth edition, published four years later, the cluster was gone. I'm not sure what to make of this disappearance. While the trauma of that event has not passed, perhaps it has been normalized; all writing is now writing in a time of terror. On the other hand, most of my students are from Gulf Coast states, and the collective trauma of their lives is not 9/11 but rather Hurricane Katrina. They experienced 9/11 as mass-mediated spectacle but remember Katrina and its aftermath as lived experience—not only the violence of the storm but also and perhaps more enduringly the travails of displacement—memories of friends and relatives in FEMA trailers, and so on.

A little more than a decade after the storm, Katrina, Rita, and their fictional siblings provide a focal point for southern literature, from novels by the Mississippians Jesmyn Ward (*Salvage the Bones* [2011]) and Michael Farris Smith (*Rivers* [2013]) to the critically acclaimed film *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012; directed and cowritten by Benh Zeitlin, who is from New York City, for what it's worth). In these works and others, the South is a disaster area. *The Walking Dead*, the AMC television series based on a long-running

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comic-book series, for example, begins in a depopulated downtown Atlanta and traces its characters' journeys through a southern wasteland. Similar landscapes occupy center stage in *Rivers* and Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* (2006). Are these thematic similarities incidental, or is there more at work? Is there something significantly southern about these ravaged landscapes populated by zombie hordes and murderous outlaws?

To get back to the question of the literary, what difference does the medium of these narratives make? What does it matter who is speaking, writing, watching, or reading? I think we can ask and try to answer these questions without rehashing shibboleths of authenticity or southern exceptionalism. As Leigh Anne Duck and others have argued, the South has long been the nation's other, an imagined space onto which the nation can project, and in which it can attempt to contain, many of its historical ills. While some viewers laugh at the Robertsons' high jinks on *Duck Dynasty*, right-thinking folks congratulate themselves as they condemn the patriarch Phil Robertson's homophobia and retrograde views on race. At the same time, the inordinate popularity of the show suggests that viewers inside and outside the South enjoy the stereotyped spectacle it offers. On another level, though, reality television's cartoon hillbilly version of the South can conceal real horrors, as the child-molestation revelations involving the family depicted on *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* attest.

Describing the line that separates the hurricane-ravaged, anarchic South from the rest of the country, one character in *Rivers* observes, "The Line is the problem for us all. Those above it. Those below it. Those who drew it. . . . It tells us some people are all right. Some people ain't" (109). At its worst, the exploitative spectacle of the dysfunctional southern families on reality television does the same, telling viewers that they are all right while others ain't. A key role for southern literature in the twenty-first century is to write back against this line. Smash the Mason-Dixon, indeed.

Note

1. *Squidbillies* "[f]ollows the adventures of the Cuylers, an impoverished and dysfunctional family of anthropomorphic, air-breathing, redneck squids who live in a rural Appalachian community in the US state of Georgia" (*Squidbillies*).

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