Future Souths, Speculative Souths, and Southern Potentialities

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THIS IS A MOMENT FOR RELENTLESS FORWARD GAZING, AN IMPULSE ALREADY EVIDENT, FOR EXAMPLE, AT TWO CONFERENCES IN 2013: RACE in Space, a gathering at Duke University, where Mae Jemison spoke about her project 100 Year Starship, and the meeting of the South Atlantic Modern Language Association, with the theme of making meaning in networked worlds. In several ways, the path that I want to propose for southern studies and particularly the study of southern literature is inflected by the conversations at these conferences. It is also informed by my tangential interest in speculative fictions—not necessarily of the literary variety—and by a desire to see more scholarship that goes beyond underscoring the tensions and anxieties of various Souths, scholarship attuned to the generative possibilities and (I, perhaps naively, suggest) the hopes that might emerge from the sites that we call Souths.

To that end, in this manifesto I proffer the idea of future Souths, potential Souths, and perhaps speculative Souths. We should gaze into the crystal ball of southern texts, sites, ideologies, and cultural production to think about the ways that notions of the South extend into the future. To say this is to imagine two things. The first, which few will dispute, is that there is more to this effort than reconciliation or redress, for the purpose of achieving parity for, remediating, or recuperating the South. The second is that something in the southern has a place in our collective futures and that southerners, wherever they dwell, are invested in mapping and making those futures. The second might be more of a challenge to demonstrate and discuss, especially if we consider our varied points of entry into the field and want to do this work ethically.

I am spurred here by José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* and his idea of futurity as something that is "not quite here" (29), which resonates with conceptions of Souths as sites that are "not yet there." Between the former and the latter is a space that makes possible transformative reading of Souths. Instead of being stuck in a quagmire of striving and dependent on dichotomous and hierarchical relations with comparable Norths, Souths endeavor toward futurity. In this

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PMLA 131.1 (2016), published by the Modern Language Association of America

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.1.191 Published online by Cambridge University Press

way, contemplating future Souths imbues present and past Souths with potentiality. Future Souths are inherently speculative, whether in the texts we study or in the scholarship we produce. Beyond the speculation that we must do to discuss futures extrapolated from or imagined by southern texts, I am thinking about writing that ponders fantastic, horrific, and presciently science-fictional futures.

An example is Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*. Silko writes about places and people of the American and global Souths. *Almanac of the Dead*—set in a present that could as easily be 2016 as 1991, the year the book was published—is a novel of the future, circumscribed by an almanac that tells the story from the beginning to the end of an epoch. Though most of the novel interweaves the stories of various presents, it concludes in a future that will begin with a march. In that future, global hierarchies are either upended and realigned in indigenous chronologies, geographies, and histories or annihilated. So that we cannot ignore the prophecy of the almanac, Silko underscores that the catalytic forces that will bring about this future have already begun to coalesce. Future visions, like the one that Silko offers in *Almanac*, require a new kind of intellectual labor and investment from us as readers and interpreters of the South. We become southern world builders of a different stripe, concerned with the Souths that might be rather than the Souths that are and have been. Theories of southern potentiality that look to the future offer a liberatory shift.

Perhaps it seems counterintuitive to call for meditations on the southern futures when so much remains to be done in the work of expanding the southern to include the voices, experiences, histories, and cultural contributions of communities long excluded from discussions—black Souths, indigenous Souths, women's Souths, gay Souths, immigrant Souths, migrant Souths, and so on—and the overlapping or coexisting Souths that constantly appear when we employ a global lens. That work of recovery, though, is crucial to conceiving future Souths. Through those expansions and openings—to use Muñoz as a touchstone again—we will certainly encounter visions, gestural and fully mapped, of possible futures. (The futures that will emerge as we expand the canon of the southern may be specific to the communities that produce the visions or may encompass the entire South.) We will find visions not only of possible futures but also of futures now past, which create more provocative contexts for the analysis of recent texts, events, and developments. Those visions will become clearer as more pieces of the puzzle are recovered, through discovery, analysis, and throwing open the gates.

The more thought I give to the texts I study—writing by people of color, specifically American Indians and African Americans—the more the work seems to have always been pointing toward this way of interpretation. In Alice Walker's *Meridian*, Truman Held returns to the home where he first reunites with the titular character. She has vanished, but her distinctive blue-and-white conductor's hat remains. Truman puts on the hat and, in doing so, assumes Meridian's activist labor. There the novel concludes, yet it does not end. This moment demands our renewed consideration of *Meridian* to understand what it means to be an activist in Meridian's vein (and Meridian's civil rights activism is a southern activism) and what Truman will carry forward. Southern futures for authors of color are rife with possibility and imbue every scintilla of their visions of worlds and tellings of histories; these writers have been leading us to such futures all along.

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.1.191 Published online by Cambridge University Press