Journal of American Studies, **49** (2015), 4, 861–870
© Cambridge University Press and British Association for American Studies 2015
doi:10.1017/S0021875815001772 First published online 5 October 2015

Responses to New Southern Studies Forum

What the New Southern Studies Does Now

JON SMITH

For fifteen years, the New Southern Studies (NSS) has been doing battle on two very different fronts. To Americanists, we have tried to talk about what Houston Baker and Dana Nelson, in the essay that named the movement, called "the national formation of the United States and the dynamics of race, region, and citizenship entailed by, as it were, a putatively split and decidedly Manichean geography"; to southernists, we have talked about the need to get beyond what the same pair of writers called "our familiar notions of Good (or desperately bad) Old Southern White Men telling stories on the porch, protecting white women, and being friends to the Negro."[1] Although in both struggles we keep bumping up against putatively objective scholars' unacknowledged and deeply self-serving fantasies about who "we" are (whether as "Americans" or "southerners," "radical" Americanists or Atticus Finch-y liberal white southernists[2]), the former arguments – as Baker and Nelson's diction suggests – have tended to be more abstract, theoretical, ambitious, interesting, and smart; the latter, in contrast, have always felt like a rearguard action.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given that this forum restricts participation to "seven established scholars of the US South," my response to it also feels chiefly like a rearguard action. I am sorry to say so, and of course there are positives here. After coediting no fewer than three bridge-building essay collections in recent years,

English Department, Simon Fraser University. Email: jsa106@sfu.ca. The author deeply wishes to thank Myka Abramson, Martyn Bone, Leigh Anne Duck, and Scott Romine for their very smart, rapid responses to a previous draft of this essay. All errors of fact and infelicities of tone remain, as ever, very much my own.

[1] Houston A. Baker Jr. and Dana D. Nelson, "Preface: Violence, the Body, and 'The South,'" *American Literature*, 73, 2 (2001), 231–44, 231, 232.

[2] This essay was written before the publication of *Go Set a Watchman*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875815001772 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Brian Ward has now done NSS the further great favor of bringing it into the premier British journal of American studies. His introduction and afterword generally do engage with Americanist concerns, and he has read widely and carefully in NSS. Coleman Hutchison is a good and ambitious scholar, and historians Natalie Ring and Benjamin Wise, whatever the limits of their particular arguments here, have written books of just the sort that American studies scholars – particularly of the hemispheric or queer varieties – need to be reading. David Gleeson, in attending to the affect of some historians – "took unkindly," "perceived a slight," "irritating" – opens a door I hope to pass through later in this response. Sarah Robertson and Sherita Johnson are southernist critics who read both historians and theorists, and that is a good thing.

If I nevertheless find the contributions here, with some exceptions, less intellectually rigorous than I think the field deserves, it is for several reasons. Too often, generalizations about the NSS are made from insufficient or simply outdated evidence. Too often, crucial things are misread: not just critical arguments or theoretical terms, but simple words like "new" and "southern studies." Too often, evidence is presented that, on closer inspection, would seem to support not the author's claim but its opposite. Too often there are what I will call, after Natalie Ring, "judicious career moves": points at which scholars who should know better seem to overstate the NSS's alleged neglect of southern historians, apparently to appear "fair and balanced" to those historians. And ultimately, too few of the questions pondered here have much to do with the current state of American studies.

One of the strangest discoveries for me of this forum has been that, outside a midsize circle of active scholars, even southernist literary critics don't seem to know what the New Southern Studies is or does. Sherita Johnson seems familiar chiefly with the circum-Caribbean work of a decade ago; Sarah Robertson praises us for "accept[ing] West Virginia's southern credentials," but to ask, or care, whether a place is or is not "southern" is to reinforce precisely the "split and Manichean geography" that NSS seeks to question (704). Both scholars call the 2002 volume *South to a New Place* and the work of Michael Kreyling NSS; Johnson even calls the latter's *South Central Review* essay "Toward 'A New Southern Studies'" a "field-defining treatise" (714).[3] However, while *South to a New Place* remains an interesting space of overlap between old and new, and has some essays by NSS scholars, it isn't really NSS. The editors' claim that "Southern place is becoming a much more fluid concept," for example, reflects their inability at the time to just

[3] "Forum: What's New in Southern Studies – And Why Should We Care?", *Journal of American Studies*, 48, 3 (2014), 691–733. Page references are given parenthetically in the text.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875815001772 Published online by Cambridge University Press

let go of the notion of "southern place."[4] And in that *SCR* essay, Kreyling tries to argue that Baker and Nelson are doing little new; that *Look Away!* thinks "that just because we come after them, we're smarter"; that Jennifer Greeson is trying too hard to "avoid traditional Southern literary-critical paths"; and that Leigh Anne Duck, in an essay that strongly criticizes V. S. Naipaul's racism, is somehow trying to help "the South [gain] another Nobel laureate."[5] Particularly in that essay, Michael Kreyling doesn't do New Southern Studies. He wants New Southern Studies to get off his lawn.

If even some southern literary critics have difficulty understanding what the New Southern Studies is, it is understandable that southern historians might as well. What is more puzzling – and more interesting – is why so many would assume that even the name of the movement constitutes an affront against themselves. It hardly requires literary training to understand that words mean different things in different contexts. *New*, for example, does not always mean "completely unlike anything that has ever been done anywhere ever." The granular historical context of the *new* in New Southern Studies matters. Back in the 1990s, southern literary studies had much less professional prestige than southern history. Perhaps this was because, as has often been pointed out, Louis D. Rubin was no C. Vann Woodward. But a broader reason, as has also often been pointed out, was that the field had stayed wedded to the New Criticism of its native sons Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren long after the exegetical limits and the disturbing implied politics of their methodology had become obvious to nearly everybody else in literary studies. Paul Bové had skewered the lingering dons of southern literary studies as reactionary "professional southernists" back in 1986 (the original article appeared in *boundary2* six years before the book version cited in the forum[6]), and ideas that were big in the mid-1980s everywhere else didn't seem to hit southern literary studies until the late 1990s at best. Kreyling's 1998 *Inventing Southern Literature*, for example, made essentially the same argument about southern literary studies that Russell J. Reising had made about American literary studies twelve years earlier in *The Unusable Past*. When Houston Baker and Dana Nelson argued against an old southern studies characterized by those "familiar notions" of old southern white men on front porches (their shorthand for Agrarianism), they were, perhaps, being unfair

[4] Sharon Monteith and Suzanne W. Jones, "Introduction: South to New Places," in Jones and Monteith, eds., *South to a New Place: Region, Literature, Culture* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 1–19, 3.

[5] Michael Kreyling, "'Toward 'a New Southern Studies,'" *South Central Review*, 22, 1 (Spring 2005), 4–18, 9, 11.

[6] Paul Bové, "Agriculture and Academe: America's Southern Question," *Boundary2*, 14, 3 (Spring 1986), 169–96.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875815001772 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and even a bit cruel, but old southern studies had such a justly horrendous reputation in American literary scholarship that to make any headway there they had to make it very clear they were not interested in continuing down the dirt road of Agrarianism. The last thing they were doing was targeting, say, John Hope Franklin or Stanley Elkins. In retrospect, a phrase like "The Not Terrible Southern Studies" might better have reflected their distancing intention, but that isn't as catchy and in any event we are now stuck with "New" – as are, among many others, the New Deal, the New Critics, the New Americanists, the New Historicists, the New Chaucer Society (founded in 1979; the old Chaucer Society folded a few years later), and the New Western Historians. Such usages today sound to most of us neither "shrill" nor lacking in "humility"; they sound like artifacts of the conditions that prevailed when the movements were founded.

Similarly, "southern studies" was never intended to refer to "all work ever done on the South anywhere ever," but to a particular interdisciplinary configuration that, at the time, very much had its problems – and not just in literary studies. The most prominent interdisciplinary southern studies journal, *Southern Cultures* (which still calls its front matter, usually written by an old southern white man, "front porch"), reflected the concerns of its founder, sociologist John Shelton Reed, who was deeply invested in southern exceptionalism and who had even published, sometimes pseudonymously, in the neoconfederate journal *Southern Partisan*. On the occasion of his retirement, *Southern Cultures* published – in its Spring 2001 issue, which would have appeared just weeks before Baker and Nelson's special issue of *American Literature* – a Doug Marlette cartoon of a statue of Reed holding a giant fountain pen, its affixed tip recalling a bayonet. The caption read "At least that's one Confederate monument they can't tear down," and the statue's pediment read "C.S.A."[7] The 1989 *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* was better in its white liberal way – it too celebrated "the region's fundamental uniqueness," but as "a somewhat curious, often elusive blend created by blacks and whites who have lived together for more than 300 years."[8] It's unclear that's quite how most black southerners would have put it. Even more fundamentally, and regardless of the work of individual southern historians, fifteen years ago not a single interdisciplinary southern studies center, program, or journal was engaged in anything like a serious critical interrogation of its own identitarian *raison d'être*. Whether they are today – when "foodways scholarship" proclaiming potlikker "the distilled essence of the South" sucks up so much of their oxygen – is a question well worth asking.

[7] Doug Marlette, "At Least That's One Confederate Monument They Can't Tear Down," *Southern Cultures* 7, 1, (Spring 2001), 1.

[8] See http://uncpress.unc.edu/books/T-3095.html, accessed 28 Jan. 2015.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875815001772 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Perhaps, then, the rather "indignant" (Wise 719) emotional response among some historians to the New Southern Studies is simply the result of a misreading, and correcting the misreading will, therefore, usher in a new age of understanding, acceptance, cooperation, and progress. But evidence suggests it may be more accurate to say that these historians' emotions and anxieties *precipitated* the misreading, which makes things more difficult.[9] Gleeson (698–9), for example, notes that Martin and Martin complain of Cohn's and my "unwarranted" and "patronizing contention" that "southern historians continue to ignore all interdisciplinary perspectives and even comparative histories."[10] However, if one reads our introduction, one discovers we make no such contention whatsoever. In a short space, we positively cite southern historians C. Vann Woodward, Edward Ayers, Charles Joyner, Michael O'Brien, John Howard, Joel Williamson, Richard King, and Charles Reagan Wilson, along with western historian Patricia Nelson Limerick – in fact, we build sections of our argument on their work – and we make no positive or negative contentions, sweeping or otherwise, about "southern historians" anywhere: the word *historians*, in fact, we never use at all.

The misreading, then, seems excessive, a symptom of something bigger: an insecurity, a defensiveness, an *unreasonableness* at the core of a discipline that prides itself on being the non-shrill baritone voice of sober reason. It is not the only symptom. Most American studies scholars – which is to say most readers of this journal – would define "interdisciplinarity" as an engagement with, or synthesis of, conversations in multiple fields. (As a work of American studies, *Finding Purple America*, for whatever it's worth, engages with literary studies, American studies, cultural studies (especially of subcultures and pop music), southern studies, Lacanian psychoanalysis, ethnography, marketing theory, graphic-design theory, fashion theory, and work on landscape architecture and site-specific art.) Several contributors to this forum, however, imply, on the contrary, that the value or interdisciplinarity of an essay collection or book series, presented as metonymic of the value or interdisciplinarity of the New Southern Studies itself, should be determined by how many historians are in it. "Historians only completed a few of the essays" (698); two collections "includ[e] only one overtly historical essay between them" (historian Richard King's Richard Wright essay apparently being insufficiently "overt") (702); two book series do not contain enough works by historians (708). To my

[9] For a full discussion of how an academic field can be structured less by ideas and principles than by a set of feelings please see chapter 1 of Jon Smith, *Finding Purple America: The South and the Future of American Cultural Studies* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013).

[10] Cheryl English Martin and Charles H. Martin, review of *Look Away! The U.S. South in New World Studies*, *Journal of Southern History*, 72 (Feb. 2006), 240, cited in Gleeson.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875815001772 Published online by Cambridge University Press

knowledge, no other discipline thinks this way. When *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism* came out, no one in literary studies thought, "well, this is a good enough collection, but there are no literary scholars in it." We did note that several of the best points in Lassiter and Crespino's excellent introduction had been made for a decade already in our own field by scholars such as Jennifer Greeson, Baker and Nelson, Cohn and myself, and Leigh Anne Duck. Instead of growing indignant, however, we worked to forge an alliance. I approached Lassiter and Crespino, and together we organized two roundtables mixing historians and critics on "American Studies after Southern Exceptionalism" for the 2010 ASA convention in San Antonio. (Hutchison was on one.) The panels, however, were not well attended, which may say something rather unfortunate about the priorities of (US?) American studies in 2010, even when the convention is held in Texas.

Such an openness is not, of course, the picture of New Southern Studies vis-à-vis historians that Natalie Ring tries to draw. The absence of historians in the New Southern Studies series, to cite an example with which I am very familiar as the series' coeditor, would indeed indicate a bias on literary scholars' part if historians kept sending smart, interdisciplinary manuscripts to the series and kept getting declined – and perhaps would indicate one even if the press and the series simply neglected to pursue work by historians. But if the series repeatedly offered contracts to historians and they repeatedly declined them, citing concerns that if their books appeared in the series too many other historians would not read them, the picture looks rather different. And the latter is exactly what happened regarding the "judicious career move" that Ring places in a footnote (only added – full disclosure – at my request), in which Ring, after accepting a contract in the NSS series, asked to be moved to a purely historical one. As Ring knows as well, we also extended a contract to another historian and met a similar response, with that book also ultimately appearing in another Georgia series. These offers took place early in the series' history – the other historian's in 2008, Ring's even earlier – and if two of the first four or five books in the series had been by historians, we might not be having this conversation. Moreover, when I learned in 2010 about Wise's project (at a conference that Ward co-organized), I tried to recruit it for the series as well, but it was already committed to UNC Press. The chief obstacles to historians' publishing in the NSS series, at any rate, have not come from the series. They have come from the very historians complaining about it.

From the perspective of American studies, then, when it comes to southern historians' excuses for dismissing work outside their field, getting huffy about nomenclature is the new getting huffy about theory (on the horizon: getting huffy about tone). Logically, it simply doesn't matter what series *The Problem South* ultimately appeared in; in ambition, range, and execution,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875815001772 Published online by Cambridge University Press

it's still New Southern Studies. The same goes for, say, Megan Kate Nelson's *Trembling Earth*. I think of a book like John Howard's *Men Like That* as New Southern Studies *avant la lettre*, for the same reasons of ambition, range, and execution: it didn't just change southern history, it changed – or should have changed – *queer* history. In a smaller way, so too does Wise's *William Alexander Percy. The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism* is New Southern Studies, as several of the writers here rightly suggest, and so are well-done anti-exceptionalist books by its contributors, such as Joseph Crespino's *Strom Thurmond's America* and Kevin Kruse's *White Flight*. These scholars hardly need (and may well not want) my imprimatur, but that is also my point: after fifteen or twenty years of the transnational turn in American studies, nobody really needs a southern historian to concede grudgingly that "postcolonial theory too may have some application" (Gleeson 701) either.

In fact, the cutting edge of American studies these days hardly resides in quarter-century-old references to transnationalism, cultures of US imperialism, critiques of American exceptionalism, or even melodramas of beset counterculturehood and resistance through rituals. Rather, that edge lies in attempts to think beyond the increasingly apparent political, intellectual, and even ethical bankruptcy of such approaches, at least when accompanied, as they generally have been, by claims of radical, countercultural transgression on the part of tenured professors at elite universities. "Inclusiveness … [has] become a substitution for methodology" and "the posture of critique has become an endgame, a substitute for self-criticism," write Russ Castronovo and Susan Gillman.[11] "Their structural position within the academy renders even the most explicitly 'radical' of faculty oblivious to their role in hierarchical academic and economic structures," reads the MLA Subconference manifesto.[12] Adolph Reed writes that

> despite the dogged commitment of several generations of American Studies and cultural studies graduate students who want to valorize watching television and immersion in hip-hop or other specialty market niches centered on youth recreation and the most ephemeral fads as both intellectually avant-garde and politically "resistive," it should be time to admit that that earnest disposition is intellectually shallow and an ersatz politics.[13]

[11] Russ Castronovo and Susan Gillman, "Introduction: The Study of the American Problems," in Castronovo and Gillman, eds., *States of Emergency: The Object of American Studies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 1–16, 3, 13.

[12] Bennett Carpenter, Laura Goldblatt, Lenora Hanson, Anna Vitale, Karim Wissa, and Andrew Yale, "Feces on the Philosophy of History! A Manifesto of the MLA Subconference," *Pedagogy*, 14, 3 (Fall 2014), 381–94, 384.

[13] Adolph Reed, "*Django Unchained*, or, *The Help*: How 'Cultural Politics' Is Worse Than No Politics at All, and Why," Nonsite.org, 9, at http://nonsite.org/feature/django-unchained-or-the-help-how-cultural-politics-is-worse-than-no-politics-at-all-and-why, accessed 1 Feb. 2015.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875815001772 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Even baby boomers Barbara Tomlinson and George Lipsitz – writing in *American Quarterly*, no less – now critique American studies scholars' "neoliberal consumerist assumptions" and ask, "What could be more useful to neoliberal hegemony than 'oppositional' scholars who declare the work of other 'oppositional' scholars hackneyed and banal?" "In a neoliberal society," they continue, "*even resistance is structured in dominance. Claiming* to transcend received categories is *not to do so* … What is presented as an oppositional identity can become just another 'brand'."[14] The rhetoric of Nina Baym's "Melodramas of Beset Manhood" or even Amy Kaplan's "Left Alone with America" was that "if we dig a little, we can see that the underlying assumptions of these scholars are actually quite sexist and racist." The mood today – unprecedented in the short history of the field – is "wow, these people are posturing, shallow, oblivious, unself-conscious *assholes*."

In its skepticism about oppositional identities and its insistence that American studies' drive not simply to ignore but to disavow the South – and Flyover Country more broadly – in the name of an alleged radicalism has kept the field from understanding the nation and national formation, the New Southern Studies fits in very well with these emergent arguments. To critique Manichean geographies, most recently of the blue-state–red-state variety, has always been to critique a certain kind of narcissistic American studies – and American – melodrama. (This critique of boomers' tendency to be the heroes of their own narratives, of course, goes back not simply to Douglas Coupland's 1991 novel *Generation X* but to Christopher Lasch's 1979 *The Culture of Narcissism*.) You can neither achieve progressive goals nor even do an American studies worthy of the name without troubling to ask, as Thomas Frank did a decade ago, "What's the matter with Kansas?" Yet US American studies, at least within the academy, has been singularly uninterested in Kansas. Or Indiana. Or Alabama. (Or Louisiana, except when Katrina provided an occasion for easy melodrama.) Perry Miller famously inaugurated southern exceptionalism in the field when he "recognize[d] … the priority of Virginia, but what I wanted was a coherence with which I could coherently begin."[15] Half a century later, in declaring Los Angeles a site "indicative of the key issues that define contemporary American studies," the editors of *American Quarterly* were still giving the field a remarkably convenient coherence around someplace, anyplace, other than the South, red states, Flyover Country, Orange County.[16] Today, the Israel boycott – talk

[14] Barbara Tomlinson and George Lipsitz, "American Studies as Accompaniment," *American Quarterly*, 65, 1 (March 2013), 1–30, 8, 9, original emphasis.
[15] Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1956), viii.
[16] Raúl Homero Villa and George J. Sánchez, "Introduction: Los Angeles Studies and the Future of Urban Culture," *American Quarterly*, 56, 3 (Sept. 2004), 499–505, 499.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875815001772 Published online by Cambridge University Press

about Manichean geographies! – offers yet another opportunity for cost-free melodramatic *jouissance* instead of analysis of complexity and flux within the still-relevant borders of the US.

So where do we go from here? Within southern studies, although everybody seems to want to cite New Southern Studies and be "with it," it's also still true that a large percentage of scholars in the field – especially the elderly and those younger scholars who chose to be trained as "southernists" – identify as "southern" and hence have considerable difficulty processing Leigh Anne Duck's notion of "southern nonidentity" – and hence New Southern Studies' whole rather brutal critique of their sense not only of the field but also of themselves as scholars and even as people, agents, citizens. Within American studies, what in *Finding Purple America* I call the "'cool kids' ethos" still keeps most scholars – baby boomers and their most successful, most derivative former graduate students – from engaging with the region at all. Although a few books from prestige presses like *Look Away!* (Duke 2004) and *Our South* (Harvard 2010) have been reviewed in *American Quarterly*, for example, most of the most important books in the field – including books that earned people tenure at places like Dartmouth, Cornell, UT–Austin, and Duke – have not. We still seem to be battling not ideas so much as identitarian biases.

Aware that most movements – New Historicism, the New Americanists, even "thing theory" – have come in rather more decisively than this, New Southern Studies scholars can, perhaps, console themselves with the idea that, as a dean once told me when I was in my first job in a truly horrific department, "people don't change, demographics do." But again, there's a problem: southern studies (rather more than southern history) *still* tends to attract people who identify unproblematically as "southern"; that problem won't go away when the last few remaining "professional southernists" retire. And in American studies, the generation that invented "diva citizenship" is not likely to go gently into retirement, nor are the well-placed figures of my own generation, having learned from the masters, likely to stop doubling down on symbolic gestures and radical disavowal.

Ten or fifteen years ago, when I did the postcolonial/hemispheric thing, I was helping present to American studies a magical, traumatized South, a global South, one of those places that the field is always seeking out, in an eerie echo of colonialism itself, for its own redemption.[17] I didn't mean to, and in the introduction to *Look Away!* Deborah Cohn and I were pretty harsh on those who would simply fold "the South" and the hybrid urbanity

[17] My argument here about transnational American studies' updated "errand into the wilderness" recapitulates George Handley's in *Postslavery Literatures in the Americas: Family Portraits in Black and White* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000), 28–29.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875815001772 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of cities like Atlanta or Charlottesville into the essentialized melancholy Caribbean of, say, Naipaul's *A Turn in the South*.[18] But insofar as that book was academically popular, it was popular because that's where people in several fields wanted it to take them. The New Southern Studies has not stood still over the past decade, however, and works like Leigh Anne Duck's *The Nation's Region* and her essay "Southern Nonidentity," Scott Romine's *The Real South*, Jennifer Greeson's *Our South*, and my own *Finding Purple America* (and perhaps the "Toward a Post-postpolitical Southern Studies" essay that Ward generously cites) all try, with greatly varying degrees of diplomacy, to take people in multiple fields where they *don't* want to go. Of course, in exploring the troubling gaps in the boomers' "symbolic order," we have left our own blind spots and disavowals that subsequent generations, no matter how hard we have tried to eschew melodrama, will no doubt point out to us. (As Duck reminds us in "Southern Nonidentity," "every recognition constitutes a misrecognition."[19]) The cycle will continue, more or less beneficently. Most of the contributors to this forum, like many readers of this journal, haven't yet caught up to where New Southern Studies now is, where so many don't want to go. But do you really want to stay *here*?

[18] Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn, "Introduction: Uncanny Hybridities," in Smith and Cohn, eds., *Look Away! The U.S. South in New World Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 1–19, 11–15.

[19] Leigh Anne Duck, "Southern Nonidentity," *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies*, 9, 3 (July 2008), 319–30, 329.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875815001772 Published online by Cambridge University Press