

# *Southern Heritage on Display*

Public Ritual and Ethnic Diversity  
within Southern Regionalism



Edited by Celeste Ray

*"A stunningly intelligent comprehension of southern culture." —Choice*

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Southern Regionalism

Edited by  
CELESTE RAY

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# Introduction

Celeste Ray

Tell about the South. What's it like there. What do they do there.  
Why do they live there. Why do they live at all.

William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*

Although it may be said that there is one South, there are also  
many Souths, and many cultural traditions among them. . . .  
There is one South spawned by its many cultures.

Watson and Reed (1993, 2)

## Southern Studies

Much of the ink spilt defining, explaining, or explaining away the South has examined successive myths of the region. Charles Reagan Wilson summarizes the sequence as follows: "The mythic perspective on Southern history would begin with the idea of a Colonial Eden, then portray the romantic Old South and the crusading Lost Cause, followed by the materialistic New South, and the twentieth century, with repeated expressions of a Savage South, but culminating seemingly in the idea of a Sun Belt" (1999, 4). Drawing from titles of books and articles published on the region in the second half of the twentieth century, Fred Hobson (1983) would also add mythic descriptions of the Emerging South, the Disappearing South, the Enduring South, the Conservative South, the Progressive South, the Agrarian South, the Solid South, the Divided South, the Provincial South, the Embarrassing New South, the South as Counterculture, the Romantic South, the Militant South, and the Benighted South.<sup>1</sup> Accounts of the South contradict or affirm perceptions of a singular South based on a seemingly immutable list of



cultural traits (variously defined). So many differing and often oppositional myths have emerged because the South has always been a complex setting for cultural creoles, the production of which southerners and scholars alternately acknowledge or deny. Watson and Reed, quoted above, aptly reexpress journalist W. J. Cash's 1941 observation: "There are many Souths and many cultural traditions among them."<sup>2</sup>

Most southern myths deny or ignore the South's tiered and dynamic cultural patterns. In the process of mythmaking, adherents do not necessarily set out to create falsehoods. In the anthropological sense, a myth is a combination of facts, images, and symbols that people selectively renegotiate to create a desirable public memory, or a justification for a worldview (Ray 2001, 16; Gallagher and Nolan 2000, 8). As William Davis writes, "Somewhere at the root of almost every myth there is some tendril of truth or fact or *perceived* fact" (1996, 175). In the southern case, what has proved most enduring as a cultural (as well as political and economic) benchmark is the Civil War, so that all things southern are southern by their reference to that event. Certainly the Civil War continues to serve as a cultural root paradigm in celebration and commemoration of identities, both uniting and dividing southerners. However, the South is about much more than the Civil War, and southerners embrace, often simultaneously, many alternate visions of themselves that are completely *of* the South yet lack any reference to the mythic Souths.

Southerners are a stereotype-attracting and stereotype-espousing people. Stereotypes of southerners by southerners and by nonsoutherners are too myriad to catalog here. Defining stereotypes as "overstatements of difference. . . . mental portraits drawn from a modicum of fact, exaggerated and simplified," Patrick Gerster notes that the citizenry of the stereotyped South are "a distillation of both fact and fiction" (1989a, 494). By the end of the colonial period, Thomas Jefferson pointed out that the newly independent nation already had culturally distinct northern and southern regions. He distinguished northerners as "cool, sober, laborious, and chicaning" as compared with southerners, whom he saw as "fiery, voluptuary, indolent, and candid" (O'Brien 1979, 3; Tindall 1995, 25).<sup>3</sup> In what George Tindall calls "the heyday" of regionalism, the Vanderbilt Agrarians championed a vision of the South in their 1930 manifesto *I'll Take My Stand* as a "traditional society that was religious, more rural than urban, and politically conservative—a society in which

human needs were met by family, claniship, folkways, custom, and community" (1995, 26–27; see also Dorman 1993). While more often than not defining the South in utopian terms, southerners have also contributed to the creation and perpetuation of negative stereotypes, embracing them with a mix of humor and pride and as part of their own regional consciousness.

David Goldfield has noted that over the centuries African Americans "devised several mechanisms to relieve tension and assert their dignity. One method was to internalize the white image, to totally submerge identity into an extension of white imagination" (1990, 7). Stereotypes such as "Jezebel" and "pickaninny" and those once variously internalized by *some* African Americans ("mammy," "Sambo," and "Uncle Tom") defined African Americans in terms of their relationship to European Americans and have become largely passé since the civil rights movement. Yet we still have a host of stereotypical, "white" southern characters, affirmed by southern scholars. In what Carole Hill calls his "butterfly collection of white southern types" (1998, 16), John Shelton Reed defines the "good ole boy and good ole gal," the "redneck," the "hillbilly," the "belle," and "crackers."<sup>4</sup>

With so many myths and stereotypes of what is "southern," what do we mean by "southern heritage, display, and public rituals" in this volume? By southern, we mean what is "of" the South, rather than just what is "in" it. Though such a definition may seem to beg the question, we refer to people, cultures, and traditions that have been situated in the South through time and that have developed or changed because of that southern matrix. By heritage, we mean the continually evolving and creative selection and generalization of memory that blends historical "truths" with idealized simulacra on the individual and collective levels. Though we may celebrate heritage as an unchanging "thing," it is really a process of renegotiating a past or a cultural inheritance to be meaningful in the ever-changing present. What individuals and groups perceive as heritage replaces what outsiders may regard as "fact" or "history" and becomes memory. When we choose to remember a selected past in a similar way, we celebrate our unity and experience *communitas*, but in doing so we also emphasize what divides us from all those with other memories or perhaps a different memory of the same selected past (Ray 2001; see also Lowenthal 1996).<sup>5</sup>

This book examines various memories of multifaceted Souths and the creation of new ones.<sup>6</sup> To study this diversity in action

rather than in theory, we focus on public events in the South that have some reference, in confirmation or contradiction, to what is stereotypically thought of as part of regional culture. We consider the layers and contradictions in cultural ideologies expressed through display, by which we mean some kind of public ritual (a church assembly, demonstration, commemorative service, parade, etc.) performed in a public space in affirmation of an asserted identity and/or heritage.<sup>7</sup> Rather than look at a history of immigration and settlement, we look instead at how people identify themselves through popular religiosity, musical spectacles, ethnic festivals and celebrations, exhibitions of material culture, and particular dress, and what they communicate about themselves verbally and non-verbally in public gatherings.<sup>8</sup>

If the South is composed of many cultural traditions, perhaps the expressive style of varying traditions is what makes the South seem so southern. The similarities in our case studies demonstrate the diversity yet constancy of the South as a region. We consider “ethnic southerners” who are also “southern ethnics” by examining the layering of regional culture and memory in the celebration of hyphenated heritage. What is ethnicity? A sense of belonging to a group with a shared history and geographical or cultural origins. Ethnicity is a cultural rather than biological inheritance, yet it is also more than a subculture. Like heritage, ethnicity is processual; it changes with time and context.<sup>9</sup> Ethnicity might be a reclaimed identity, or it may be an ascribed identity as is often the case with minority groups. Even among those who reclaim a cultural identity as “African American” or “Scottish American” (though their ancestors have been in America for centuries), or those who now celebrate an identity their immigrant grandparents and parents tried to sublimate in the twentieth century, an ethnic identity does not always seem to them “voluntary.”<sup>10</sup> We argue that cultural diversity, like the reified notion of culture itself, is patterned and that distinctiveness within the southern region actually affirms southern regionalism.

### **The American South as a Region**

If regionalism serves as the interdisciplinary bridge for this collection, how do we define the South as a region? Do we follow mythic descriptions and include only the eleven states that were in the Confederacy? Do we include states, or parts of states, that either in the nineteenth century or today have considered themselves south-

ern (Kentucky, Maryland, or the “Little Dixies” established in the 1870s and 1880s in Missouri and southwest Oklahoma)? In the U.S. census the South includes Delaware, Maryland, West Virginia, Oklahoma, and the District of Columbia, though historically these were not part of the Confederacy and were culturally distinct from the Old South plantation mythology. Diachronic study of regions reveals the evolution of cultural and historical memory and the gradual shifts of regional centers and peripheries. Tourism brochures for southern and western Kentucky now portray these areas as the “gateways” or “strongholds” of the Old South (though Kentucky was not one of the Confederate states). Is Texas wholly or partially southern if, as the popular saying suggests, “Fort Worth is where the West begins?”

For the purposes of this volume we include the following twelve states as “southern”: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia, recognizing the ambivalence of Texans in defining themselves as part of the South or as part of the Southwest and recognizing that residents in parts of Oklahoma also define themselves as southerners. We also note a number of enduring subregions within the South including the Sunbelt, the Carolina Piedmont, the Kentucky Bluegrass Country, the Mississippi Delta, the Ozarks, the Deep South (Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina), the Uplands of southern Appalachia (making a distinction between the Cumberland Plateau and the Blue Ridge), Wiregrass Country (from southeastern Alabama and the panhandle of Florida across the southwestern coastal plain of Georgia to the east coast of Savannah), and the flatlands of the Black Belt (named for the rich soils across Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina, the prime areas for cotton farming, though “the Cotton Belt” also extends into the Piedmont and the Delta).

How we bound a region depends on our analytical, political, or celebratory purposes, though in reality a region is always mutable. Carole Crumley notes that we can view regions “as homogeneous, heterogeneous or both depending upon our goals as researchers” (1979, 143–45). Regions emerge not just from geographic proximity or common historical origins but from the act of studying them (Lambek and Strathern 1998, 21–22). Regions are environmentally, historically, and culturally created, but they are also constructed through the scholarly lens. Scholars define “our” regions as they relate to our particular studies so that the term “regionalism” can ap-

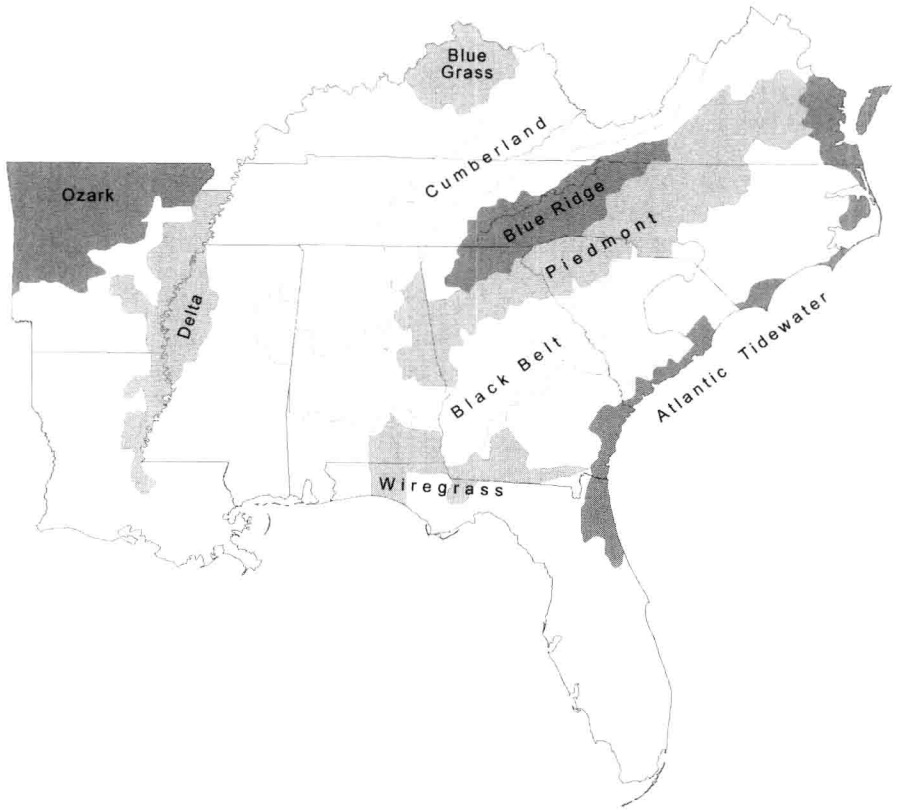


Figure 1. Select subregions of the South.

ply to our research strategies as well as indigenous sentiment and popular movements (see Wilson 1998; Vance 1982; Odum 1936; F. Turner 1925). Arjun Appadurai and Michel-Rolph Trouillot note that novel and thorough investigation of particular regions is often blocked by what Appadurai has called “gatekeeping concepts” or “theoretical metonyms,” such as caste in India and honor and shame in the Mediterranean (Appadurai 1986, 356–61; Trouillot 1992, 21–23). Trouillot suggests these concepts have acted as theoretical simplifiers and ahistorical means of bounding the object of study. Commenting on southern studies, Samuel Hyde has noted, “A tendency to focus on the unappealing qualities of the South” has “proved as central to the historiography of the region as distinctive problems did to southern culture” (1997, 1). Slavery, Jim Crow, and

racism have been gatekeeping concepts in critical southern studies, while at the same time magnolias, benevolent mammies, and the plantation legend have romantically framed another partial vision of the region. In the past decade especially, after the invention of tradition literature and “deconstruction,” it has become popular to dismantle such concepts in relation to political or cultural hegemony as a way of studying regions. In this book, we examine the historical, and recent, evolution of such gatekeeping concepts as an interesting process in itself and ask why they endure as foci of popular culture.

As a region, the American South is not a cultural monolith but a complex creole of multiple traditions.<sup>11</sup> In this book, we use “creole” and “creolization” to mean a blending of cultures after long exposure, coexistence, and interaction of two or more social groups. Southern folklore, foodways, and material culture are a synthesis of African, European, and Native American cultures (Hudson 1971; Wood 1988; Hill 1998; Joyner 1993, 1999). What we think of as typically southern often reveals the hybridity of cultural patterning (Bhabha 1994; Bendix 2000). Bluegrass music, for example, is really a mix of Celtic fiddle and African-derived banjo. Howlin’ Wolf (Chester Burnett) of the Mississippi Delta Blues tradition earned his name by imitating the “blue yodels” of the father of country music, Jimmie Rodgers (who had derived his new sound in the 1920s by combining black field hollers and Swiss yodeling).<sup>12</sup> All regions of America have diversity; it is the patterns of cultural blending that define the southern region as unique. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Through desegregation and dramatic changes in politics, economics, and the ways in which southerners interact with each other, cultural constants remain—certainly a feeling of cultural identity and distinctiveness remains. Anthropologist Frederick Barth has emphasized that cultural boundaries are more stable than culture (1969). Barth concludes that ethnicity lies in the boundary-making process itself, rather than in bodies of cultural ideas and practices associated with each group, so that cultures may change, but the boundary between them remains in place.

With current popular and scholarly discourse focusing on globalization, will regions and regionalism continue to be important in the twenty-first century? Assumptions that regional cultures will fall to transnational corporate culture are partly rooted in the fallacy that regional cultures remain only as long as they remain static. Evoking Clifford Geertz’s notion of “primordial attachments,” Nicholas

Entrikin reminds us that our attachments to places persist despite change in those places, "despite increased mobility of the population and the production of standardized landscapes" (1989, 41). Though shifts from local to national or international merchandisers, restaurateurs, and housing and town-planning styles obviously alter regional lifestyles, what may seem generic or even resistant to any local or regional cultural meaning still acquires regional and local interpretations and significance. As Mary Steedly notes, continuity is not "something that just happens in the absence of change," but rather is "something that has to be produced and reproduced in the face of change" (1999, 431–54).

What is southern in any given period continues to evolve, but since the 1700s there has always been the notion that the region is distinct. The South is a product of a unique quilting of union and disunion, inclusion and exclusion, prejudice and tolerance. In discussing southern culture as a creole we can talk about shared cultural traditions without necessarily implying that the contributing ethnic groups also shared egalitarian communities. The idea especially popular since the 1960s that the long and intimate coexistence of African Americans and European Americans in the South can enable the region to have the most harmonious "race relations" in the nation is what Charles Reagan Wilson calls "the myth of the biracial South" (1999). Martin Luther King's "dream" drew on the redemptive power of such an idea for evangelical southerners. Elvis Presley's provocative appeal was in his blend of blues and black and white gospel sounds. The popular media has touted Bill Clinton as "America's first black president." In many southern towns Martin Luther King Day and Robert E. Lee's birthday are celebrated together, which Wilson says is "surely a ritual triumph of the myth of the biracial South" (1999, 16). Whether or not southerners who celebrate one would celebrate the other, such combinations acknowledge the need/desire for both accommodation and distinctiveness.

According to Charles Joyner, "every white southerner has an African heritage as well as a British one, and every black southerner has a European heritage as well as an African one" (1983, 163–64). Remarking on its similarity to W. J. Cash's observations fifty years ago, James Cobb provides an illustrative quote from Ralph Ellison: "You can't be Southern without being black and you can't be a black Southerner without being white. . . . Such sentiments are heartfelt and appealing, but they also [are] more wishful than specific" (1999, 147). Certainly cultural exchanges between southerners have taken

place within a society whose hierarchical nature is, in some ways, documented, but the personal interactions and cultural borrowings over the centuries that have shaped the cultures of the South have necessarily been heterarchical (with humans often interacting with disregard for rank or interpreting social rankings in varied ways) and therefore more elusive for those who wish to record them.<sup>13</sup> The existence of power differentials within a society influences, but does not *determine*, which cultural attributes and beliefs may be shared. The exclusive focus on hierarchy present in many histories, as well as popular mythologies, fails to acknowledge the subtle interactions and flow of ideas between social groups that produce cultural creoles.

### Approaches

We examine cultural and ethnic festivals, but our focus is on heritage, performance, and the affirmation of sometimes contested identities. Rather than view these festivals as a product of postmodernism or as the last rally of dying local communities, we consider the meaning of identity and heritage, continuity and invention, within the context of thriving regionalism. Our event-centered fieldwork offers an interdisciplinary challenge to the cultural studies of the 1980s and 1990s in which scholars attributed meaning to symbols and public rituals from afar—without engaging the actors and without substantive documentation (see Knauff 1996, 80–83).<sup>14</sup>

The contributors are predominantly from the field of anthropology but also from geography, history, and literature. Several of the contributors have spent over a decade with the various communities they describe here. Though from different disciplines, the majority of us emphasize anthropology's ethnographic approach and all of us have been influenced by ethnographic writing. What do we mean by ethnography? Considerable time spent "in the field" getting to know those we write about; being enculturated by them, that is, learning what it means to be a member of their social group through simultaneous participation and observation. In addition to joining in social events and observing them, we have also spent time studying written and oral histories of the groups we interpret and conducting formal and informal group and individual interviews.

Fieldwork reveals the correspondence and contradictions between what people say they believe and what they actually do. In



contrast with cultural studies, we assert that cultural events cannot simply be “read as text.” Cultural studies developed in the 1980s with perceptive scholars who wanted to examine culture and pursue anthropological research without spending the time ethnographic fieldwork demands. Cultural critics, who are often trained as literary critics, try to avoid what, in literary study, has been called “the intentional fallacy”—the fallacy being the assumption that the meaning of the text could be discovered by determining the author’s intention.<sup>15</sup> Cultural critics, then, “Trust the tale, not the teller,” while ethnographic fieldworkers particularly seek the intentions and experience of those performing and participating in public rituals. Bruce Knaft has noted that “cultural studies has all but severed itself from ethnography and other forms of detailed sociopolitical or historical documentation. . . . Its methodology, ambiguous from the beginning, could best be seen as a bricolage” (1996, 81). Cultural studies tend to draw from the theory du jour without actually asking participants how they perceive their activities and what they mean by a particular display. Rather than document what symbols appear in a public ritual and then define the entire event and the ethnic group by what we think we know about such symbols, ethnographic fieldwork requires that we ask with an open mind what those who employ symbols believe themselves to be communicating. Unlike the public culture critic of cultural studies, our role in studying popular culture is neither to condemn nor condone cultural practices. We do not pass judgment, select the most bizarre informants’ comments to represent the whole, or attempt to belittle strongly held beliefs. We do aim to present interesting developments in the shape of southern identities with balance and respect.

For regional-scale studies, event-centered ethnography seems particularly useful and most of our chapters focus on this type of study. Anthropologist Sally Falk Moore has noted that “events situate people in an unedited and ‘preanalyzed’ context, before the cultural ideas they carry and the strategies they employ are extracted and subjected to the radical reorganization and hygienic order of [the scholar’s] analytic purpose” (1994, 365). The festivals and commemorations we examine produce identity. Individuals’ identities revolve around their various experiences, statuses, and roles, but together, through public rituals, they negotiate a group identity that may slightly vary from gathering to gathering. Renato Rosaldo has described rituals as “busy intersections” where distinct life processes