

Katherine Henninger  
Louisiana State University

**“I PREFER TO LOOK FORWARD”:**

**POSITIONING THE U.S. SOUTH IN THE TIME OF BARACK OBAMA<sup>1</sup>**

**Keywords:** *nation-time, U.S. South, Barack Obama, lynching, Abu Ghraib, national identity, black masculinity*

**Abstract:** *Historically, the South has represented the past in a schema of U.S. nation-time. In the period roughly concurrent with the writing of William Faulkner (the late 1920s to 1950s) representations of the South’s pastness, as Leigh Ann Duck has argued, reflected a United States anxious both about losing certain southern cultures and anxious to move beyond them. Building on Duck’s important theorization, this essay seeks to evaluate more contemporary positionings of the South in rhetorics of American national identity. Particularly in the wake of the election of Barack Obama, the South has once again assumed a crucial, and crucially ambivalent, position in American self-fashionings to the nation and world, once again representing the cultural borders of both “backwardness” and “progress.” Analyzing a range of historic and contemporary texts—literary, political, and pop culture—I examine tensions in temporal positionings of the South for contemporary nation-building projects, and offer some speculations about how such positioning is guiding U.S. national and international policy.*

In the U.S. South, William Faulkner famously asserted, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past” (80). While the ongoing presence of the past is certainly not unique to the South (see for example, Romania), the pastness of the South has played an important strategic function both in southern self-fashioning, and in the national imagination of the United States as a whole. For example, as the South reconstructed its (white) identity after Reconstruction, Scott Romine has shown, its literature and cultural critics hearkened back to an imagined past, a solid time of organic “southern community” that could be contrasted to the deracinated industrial nation (*Narratives*). This constant and integral reference to a past South may, as I have argued elsewhere, be said to have rendered contemporary southern identity (whether in 1930 or 2009) as always already “post-South,” i.e. the “real South” was somewhere in the past, leaving those “born late” to exist in more or less tortured relation to its ghost.<sup>2</sup> With regards to the nation, Leigh Ann Duck has recently demonstrated that in the Modernist period, the South’s “backwardness” simultaneously represented a nostalgic “traditional” culture that could counter national anxieties about modernity *and* (as the Depression worsened) an increasingly “threatening chronotype” of economic stagnation and racial oppression—a possible national future (7). In the period roughly concurrent with the writing of Faulkner (the late 1920s to 1950s) representations of the South’s pastness shifted in rhetorical significance for the nation, reflecting a United States anxious about losing certain southern cultures (being too “post-South”) and anxious to move beyond them (not being “post-South” enough).

Building on Duck’s important theorization, this essay seeks to evaluate more contemporary positionings of the South in rhetorics of American national identity, especially in light of the election of the United States’ first African American president, Barack Obama. The key questions behind my analysis

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this paper was presented as a keynote speech at the International Conference of the English Department, University of Bucharest, in June 2009 (editors’ note).

<sup>2</sup> See *Ordering the Façade*, chapter 5, for a discussion of the “post-South.” The above argument is more fully developed in my forthcoming book, *Southern Sexualities and the National Imagination*.

are (to lean on Faulkner again) why bother to tell about the South? What is “the South” anymore? What does it do? Why care about it at all? These questions reflect less of *Absalom, Absalom!*'s narrative existentialism than they do the existential anxieties that have plagued Southern Studies since its beginnings. At stake is the value of the field itself. Early studies of southern literature and culture posited that the South was something exceptional, a usefully organic and authentic counter-example to a culturally and politically imperialist nation. Recent theorists of Southern literature and culture, however, have attempted to move beyond ideas of southern exceptionalism to explore the South's *representative* value for understanding U.S. dynamics of race and gender, as well as transnational dynamics of economic and cultural formation. In a version of “As the South goes, so goes the Nation,” these critics have positioned the South as central, as trope and paradigm, past and present, to these dynamics, particularly (as in the work of Houston A. Baker, Jr. and Riche Richardson) in constructions of black masculinity. As Malcolm X once famously asserted, “Mississippi is anywhere south of the Canadian border”—analyzing Mississippi the state is thus crucial to understanding Mississippi the nation (417). But how do we evaluate this positioning in the wake of the election of Barack Obama, an African American who appears to have been formed about as thoroughly outside of southern contexts as is imaginable, whose very person seems designed to de-center the South as nationally representative, to relegate the South once again to a forceful pastness? With a president who has declared his preference for looking forward, rather than getting mired in the past, what useful purpose does looking South serve?

As may be clear by now, my approach to this question will be guided by rhetorical analysis: a part textual, part political, and part meta-disciplinary examination of “the South” in relation to the field of American studies, nationalist imaginaries, and international policy. Further I want to be clear that I am interested here in *representations* of the U.S. South—in criticism, politics, and popular culture—rather than in searching for any sociological or anthropological truth of enduring (or transitory) southernness. I hope to demonstrate that, *particularly* in the wake of the election of Barack Obama, the South has once again assumed a crucial, and crucially ambivalent, position in American self-fashionings to the nation and world, once again representing the cultural borders of both “backwardness” and “progress.” And the figure that embodies this complex temporality—the back and forth of the South vis-à-vis the nation—is precisely one that the South and Obama share as primary: the spectacularized black male body. I will argue that in the time of Barack Obama (and by this I mean the years leading up to and encompassing his early presidency) representational legacies of southern black masculinity have been continually evoked, sublimated, and resurrected in efforts to create a new, “forward-looking” American national body, in ways that position the South as paradoxically in the vanguard and at the rear end of America's professed desire for “change.” Analyzing historical legacies and developments in texts ranging from recently republished early twentieth-century lynching photographs to the still unpublished photographs of torture in Abu Ghraib prison, and several popular culture texts in between them, I will examine tensions in temporal positionings of the South for contemporary nation-building projects. And, to assert that we should in fact care, I will offer some speculations about how such positioning is guiding U.S. national and international policy.

I want to emphasize again that “the South” to which I am referring is always in quotation marks—an abstract concept that has had, and continues to have, profoundly real effects. It is concepts—more accurately *narratives*—of “the South” that have been useful in American nation-building, more useful even than the very real natural and labor resources that have flowed from southern states. My arguments fit within recent critical trends sometimes referred to as “the new southern studies”—a short hand for the transition I've already mentioned, from concern with the durability and/or transience of an exceptional southernness, to an examination of why the notion of exceptional southernness came to be, of why and how various notions of “the South” have been *useful*. This transition, of course, mirrors broader “turns” in geography and cultural studies. In geographer Terry Jordan-Bychkov's useful chronology of “The Concept and Method” of region, postmodernist deconstruction revealed the hopelessness of finding real or natural regions: quite simply the homogeneity of spaces and cultures that early notions of region put forward has always been imaginary. A moment's search for “organic community” in the South reveals as

many outliers as people who might be considered members. Region is “saved” as an analytical category only by recognizing it as precisely that: a classification system, a descriptive analytical tool, that “must be designed for a particular purpose” (11). The particular purpose for geographers, according to Jordan-Bychkov, is to be able to generalize about cause and effect, to chart change—in other words to place space in time. To move back to literary terms, only the stories we tell about the South, its organic community, its obsession with the past or lack thereof, make it so.

This is why symbols are so important in discussions of “the South,” and why the South functions so powerfully as a trope in the nation. And why, as John Lowe astutely reminds us, critics have a special responsibility in talking about the South, in reinforcing or reassessing a culture “tinged...with the seemingly indelible imprint of an almost universally accepted set of stereotypes” (25). One of the first calls for a “new southern studies” came from Houston A. Baker, Jr. and Dana Nelson in the preface to their 2001 special issue of the journal *American Literature*, entitled “Violence, the Body, and ‘the South’.” Baker and Nelson set out to “reconfigure our familiar notions” of “the South,” drawing special “attention to the way ‘[the American nation’s] wholeness’ has long been constructed through the abjected regional Other, ‘the South’” (234, 236). Most often, this regional Other is symbolized in abjected bodies: thus Baker and Nelson’s focus on “the visual, bounded body of the Other [as] bedrock for the construction of both regionalism and racism in the United States” (232). The claim of relevance for new southern studies springs not from the uniqueness of the South and its racial violence (for example), but from the value in understanding how the American nation has represented its bodily violence as *contained* by and within southern borders. These borders are spatial (in an imaginary sense) and also temporal: the backwards South is the place where they do things to Othered bodies that the rest of the progressive nation abhors.

Alas, Baker and Nelson’s edited collection did not fulfill its stated goal of “completely discredit[ing] ‘the South’ as an acceptable marker of an outlaw, retrograde, socially imagined, and almost entirely fictional United States territory that contains white racism” (234). (We academics occasionally overestimate our power.) It did however inspire much important new southern studies scholarship, especially work such as Riché Richardson’s that “stresses the indispensability of the U.S. South to critical dialogues about black masculinity” and “national ideological scripts” (7, 4). The South and its abjected black male bodies remain powerful signifiers, particularly of racial and sexual dynamics that are profoundly uncomfortable, even unpatriotic, to incorporate into America’s national image. In the rest of my essay, I want to trace what I see as significant transitions, however, in the way these southern signifiers are *used* in the national imaginary, transitions that are both reflected by and perhaps problematized in the time of Barack Obama. These transitions—marking both continuities and ruptures in past modes of southern representation (and representations of southern pastness)—are most obvious in the visual realm of popular culture, and that will be my primary focus here. My discussion will be bookended by two sets of photographs that evoke the abjected southern black male body, one directly and one indirectly: the lynching photographs and the photographs of Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. Each represent significant legacies of racial and sexualized violence that represent some of the greatest challenges to President Obama’s negotiation of past and present.

American culture has few “Others” as violently visualized and bounded as the black male body. The spectacularized image of black masculinity historically most useful to American nation-formation, as Richardson, Robyn Wiegman and others have argued, has less to do with any real black male body than with the stimulating idea of such a body subjected to, or threatening to escape, white control. Making this idea “real” was the underlying purpose of most of the estimated 5,000 lynchings that occurred in America between 1885 and 1930, and of the photographs that were often made to document them.<sup>3</sup> Dozens of such photographs, culled from family estates and antique auctions, were exhibited and published under the title *Without Sanctuary* by collector James Allen in the early 2000s. The overwhelming majority of these

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<sup>3</sup> Apel evokes the “unshakeable visual authority of the lynching image” in this context (*Imagery* 45). See also Henninger, “Atrocity or Nation-building?” (245-46). The role of photography in spectacle lynchings has been analyzed by, among others, Grace Hale, Amy Wood, Dora Apel and Shawn Michelle Smith.

photographs show African American men, and sometimes women and children, strung up from trees or bridges by whites who are sometimes pictured, often not (Figure 1). Often, the violence depicted contains a sexual element: male victims are often nude below the waist, covered roughly for the camera, but in a way that implies genital mutilation has occurred. While the photographs in *Without Sanctuary* establish that such lynchings took place in all parts of the U.S.,<sup>4</sup> the iconography of black bodies hanging from trees has been firmly identified as southern, in part because a majority of such murders occurred in the South, and in part as a result of national popular culture evocations such as Billie Holiday's famous 1939 record, "Strange Fruit." Holiday sings, "Southern trees bear strange fruit,/ Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,/Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,/Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees."<sup>5</sup> In this southernification, nation-building happens in two realms—southern and American—each asserting the racial and sexual terms of citizenship through lynching, but in different ways.

In the South, lynchings represented a violent attempt to compensate for southern white's real and perceived loss of control over the terms of national citizenship. Responding to constitutional disenfranchisement in the post-Civil War Reconstruction period, white southerners reasserted through spectacular violence what had once been presumed "natural" in slavery times: white superiority over black bodies. This violence was proclaimed necessary, even virtuous, and central to southern regional identity. While the actual reasons for white southerners lynching blacks ranged from suspected murder to blacks owning too much property, the official "reason" was most often black rape of white women. The double representation of black bodies as naturally docile, childlike, and subservient, as well as savage, barbaric, and in need of firm control that was used to justify chattel slavery here tipped decisively to the savage side: every Uncle Tom was potentially a black beast rapist. If, as W.J. Cash asserted in 1941, white southerners practiced "downright gyneolatry" (86) worshiping pure asexual white women as symbols of the southern national body, black masculinity came at the turn of the twentieth century to represent a potent violent violating force that must be contained by the guardians of the nation: white men.

Photographs, with their association with the "real," became talismans of the "reality" of white southern control. If it is true, as theorists from Clifford Geertz to Guy DeBord have variously argued, that peoples and societies define themselves through spectacle, the photographs of American lynchings (and, as I will later argue, of American violence at Abu Ghraib) offer particular insights into the relation of spectacle and photographic rituals of personal, racial, and national identity-making. Far from diluting or de-authenticating the power of ritual to effect group identity, Tobin Siebers argues, the Age of Mechanical Reproduction made possible "a return to ritual that has renewed the effectiveness of the body as collective representation" (19). Photographs position the national body against the body of a national Other in ways that seem irrefutably real, and so photography plays an integral role in rituals of national imagining, even, perhaps especially, violent ones. During the large-crowd "spectacle lynchings" that reached their heyday in the 1920s, the proceedings were sometimes paused so that photographers could get the proper shots. In the days long before personal digital cameras and email, a studio photographer might chronicle a lynching and sell images printed on the spot as fifty-cent souvenirs. Whether the photographs documented a large "public" lynching or a smaller "private" one, the camera clearly functioned, as Amy Louise Wood has argued, as "an integral part of the lynching", and the spectacle of and in the images provided a forum to "both substantiate [Southern white men's] own virility in relation to the black man's alleged sexual power, and act as an intermediary bond with their (class-based) connection with other white men" (207-08).

Souvenir photos, whether made by amateur or professional photographers, enabled the moment's sexualized violence to linger and circulate, to perform its gendered, racial and national identity-building function over time and space. Distributed through personal networks or sent (openly until 1908) as postcards through the US mail, photographs of lynchings were also displayed (along with physical

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<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Figure 1 is photograph of the lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith in Marion, Indiana, in 1930. Library of Congress, USA.

<sup>5</sup> Ironically, the photograph most often cited as the inspiration for Abel Meerapool (a Jewish schoolteacher from New York) to write "Strange Fruit" is of the northern lynching represented in Figure 1 (Margolick 21).

trophies like cloth, links of chain or rope, ears, etc.) in shop windows, not only to unify white audiences, but to intimidate and humiliate African Americans into "staying in their place." In these contexts, these photographs *worked* to reinforce the notion that white domination of black Americans was the normal, natural state of affairs. Southern white senders cemented these meanings in terms of southern national, i.e. racial and sexual, identity. For example on the back of one lynching postcard written, "Warning, The answer of the Anglo-Saxon race to black brutes who would attack the womanhood of the South" (Allen et al., plates 59-61). This is a conditional warning, but in conjunction with the photograph it represents past (the fait accompli of white control of black bodies), present (an ongoing heritage of white southern racial identity) and future (a promise against future challenges to that identity).

In a broader American national context, understanding such photographs as "southern" relieved the paradox that Leigh Ann Duck evokes in her book, *The Nations Region*: how to reconcile the simultaneous existence of progressive liberal U.S. doctrine alongside racial oppression. Labeling the sexual and racial violence depicted in the photographs "southern" enabled what Baker and Nelson call "white geographical innocence" for the larger nation (234). Building on white southerners self-identification with white supremacist "tradition," northern observers, including members of the U.S. Senate who consistently failed to pass a federal anti-lynching law, consigned such behavior to an essential "backwardness" of southern culture, all the while disavowing sexualized racial violence in the rest of the nation. Furthermore, as Duck argues, understanding racial apartheid as an essential southern "way of life" was useful as a sign of the presence of rooted, "binding traditions," "stag[ing] both a national present and a regional past" for a diverse, federal America (30). Duck argues that such rhetoric became more prevalent with the arrival of the Cold War, when the South's staunch anti-Communism once again served to symbolize authentic American identity. In matters racial and sexual, however, the late 1950s saw a resurgence of the "benighted South" in popular culture, in the phenomenon of "slave romances" such as Kyle Onstott's sensationalist 1957 novel, *Mandingo* (Figure 2). This extremely popular novel, and the equally sensational 1975 film version starring James Mason, Susan George, Perry King, and boxer Ken Norton, illuminate transitions in the rhetorical usefulness of "the South" for the nation in the Civil Rights era, with ramifications for our current time.

Like *Gone with the Wind*, *Mandingo* embodies and perpetuates some of the most enduring stereotypes of southern racial and sexual mores, by way of performing important cultural work for the nation as a whole. Like D.W. Griffith's 1915 film *Birth of a Nation*, which embodied hopes for healing the nation's divisions in a story of white men uniting to prevent black male desire for white women, *Mandingo* negotiates national tensions over race and sex in a tale of racialized sexuality. While the wildly popular *Birth of a Nation* sought to salve Civil War divisions by appealing to white unity over blackness, the wildly popular *Mandingo* worked to acknowledge white sexual and moral depravity in race relations, but to firmly define and confine it as southern. Two important cultural trends help explain this shift. First, the growing post-WWII civil rights movement: Brown v. Board of Education struck down "separate but equal" school segregation in 1954; 14-year-old Emmett Till's lynching provoked national outrage in 1955; Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat later that same year. Psychological analyses of southern race relations such as W.J. Cash's *Mind of the South* in 1941 were supplemented by new historical critiques of slavery such as C. Vann Woodward's *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* in 1955. The new medium of television broadcast images of southern white violence against non-violent black integrationists. In order to preserve American national righteousness after WWII yet register these increasingly visible injustices, American popular culture worked to contain the image of white violence to the South, and to register its cause as a particularly southern system of slavery. *Mandingo* participates in this new national history by providing particularly graphic images of slavemasters' exploitative, sadistic, and miscegenistic sexual desire. In this context, it makes perfect sense that both blacks and whites are treated fairly sympathetically in *Mandingo*, or to be more accurate, that both are equally pathetic; black and white southerners are equally seduced and corrupted by a system so ingrained that it has supplanted any better nature they may have. *Mandingo* clearly revises previous romantic and largely asexual accounts of slavery such as *Gone with the Wind*, replacing them with new set of mythologies.

This is a familiar scapegoating strategy, which Gary Richards has described in relation to southern literature as “quarantining”: northern criticism in the modernist period in effect said, according to Richards, “sexual otherness is always *their* problem, *their* preoccupation, *their* identity, and *not* ours. Look, see; *their* literature proves it” (23). While Richards argues that their quarantined status allowed southern writers space to write about sexuality in strategically subversive ways, with great depth and complexity, non-southerners writing *about* the South, such as Onstott, were apparently freed from the need for subtlety. While “toying with her sweaty breasts” (576), the plantation mistress, Blanche Maxwell, comes up with her plan to avenge her husband Hammond’s preference for his black “bed wench,” Ellen: she commands Hammond’s prized “fighting Mandingo buck,” Mede, to her bed. And though Hammond seems truly to care for Mede, and is generally known as a “good master,” when Blanche gives birth to a dark-skinned baby, he poisons her and boils Mede to death, pitchforking him for good measure. Firmly situating the South as the nation’s sexual and moral “Other,” *Mandingo* reveals tensions in national efforts to re-narrate the history of slavery and race relations in America: on the one hand providing a critique of racial exploitation and on the other further objectifying African Americans as exotic, sexual pawns for newly un-repressed white desire.

The 1975 film reinforces these dynamics but with some innovations that reflect new national needs. The brutality of slavery—especially the process of buying and fighting slaves like animals—is graphically visualized, as is interracial nudity, if not sex. There is a distinct black power element to the film, absent from novel other than in the novel’s obsessive description of black male bodies. A whole new character is invented: Cicero, the rebellious slave, who is hung for trying to escape. Slaves who in the novel are complacent and even desirous of their sexual exploitation are in the film depicted as tricksters who “wear the mask” for their master and plot revenge. Most striking is the revised 1975 ending. Onstott’s 1957 novel ends with whites firmly in power, Hammond leaving his father to run Falconhurst while he goes off to Texas to escape his humiliation (at being cuckolded by his wife and slave, not at murdering them). The movie *Mandingo*’s ending is shocking in its visualized violence (though compared to the book, the boiling scene is mercifully brief) but features a new element of comeuppance for the white masters: the senior patriarch, Hammond’s father, is shot to death by his lifelong black manservant. Hammond is left in the ruins of his patriarchal kingdom, staring into the void of tragedy. Data about the movie’s reception in the South is hard to come by, but apparently *Mandingo* and other plantation “blaxploitation/sexploitation” romances like it, played to and earned a lot of money from large audiences of African Americans; the film provides a slave “history” befitting their contemporary civil rights legacies, and perhaps, fantasies.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, while the film significantly revises previous romantic and largely asexual accounts of slavery such as *Gone with the Wind*, it replaces them with new set of “Mandingo” mythologies that continue to resonate in contemporary culture, resulting in what I call, “the Mandingo effect.” Leaving solidly in place racialized sexual mythologies and attendant sexualized violence evocative of the lynching photos, the film effectively re-enshrines “the South” as the region of perverse interracial desire and strife. In other words, if mid-1970s America was ready to acknowledge white racism and sexual aggression toward its black Others, it preferred to do so on southern ground relegated safely in the past.

What is the status of “the Mandingo effect” in the time of Barack Obama? There is little question that “the South” remains the region of choice when representing interracial sexual tension and desire.<sup>7</sup> But there have been some shifts in the meaning of such representations for the nation. The most obvious example of the durability of *Mandingo*, as well as the transitions currently underway, is the 2007 film *Black Snake Moan*, starring Samuel L. Jackson and Christina Ricci (Figure 3). The marketing materials for this film explicitly evoke Mandingo-style interracial sex dynamics, reinforcing the visuals with the tagline, “Everything is hotter down South” for good measure. Loosely based on George Eliot’s 1861 novel

<sup>6</sup> This interpretation is suggested, alongside some statistics on *Mandingo*’s profitability, by Campbell, “Burn, Mandingo, Burn” 112-115, and *The Celluloid South* 172-175.

<sup>7</sup> E.g., *Mississippi Masala* (1991), *Monster’s Ball* (2001), and *True Blood* (2008-present), discussed below.

*Silas Marner*, *Black Snake Moan* features another nymphomaniac white girl, Rae (played by Ricci), whose debauchery lands her severely beaten on the roadside in front of a sexually alienated but deeply religious black man's (Samuel L. Jackson playing Lazarus)'s rural home. Partly in fear for being accused of harming Rae (and thus perhaps being lynched?), Lazarus decides that it is his spiritual duty to heal her, and to prevent her from running away, he ties her to a radiator with a 40-lb chain. There is plenty of imagery in the film that evokes *Mandingo*'s interracial encounter between Blanche and Mede, but the results are decisively different. Through wholesome food and old-fashioned loving attention, Rae slowly heals, and decides to stay with Lazarus of her own free will. Meanwhile, Lazarus has started a promising new relationship with a local black pharmacist, and everybody dances together as Lazarus plays the local blues joint. When Rae's white boyfriend (Justin Timberlake) returns home—after an initial threat to shoot Lazarus—all are friends and the younger couple gets married and drives off into the sunset.

*Black Snake Moan* offers a double vision of “the South,” reflecting perhaps a shifting role for the region in contemporary America. At the level of plot, the film builds upon familiar southern characters and settings, evoking southern popular culture “tradition,” and at the same time suggests that these traditions might be the source of actual change in American race relations. The message is at once progressive, visualizing genuine, voluntary interracial intimacy, and eminently conservative: in the end, a black man saves white heterosexual marriage through an Uncle Remus-like combination of song, storytelling, and sage advice. The 40-lb. chain marks multiple transitions: infamous symbol of chain-gang racial dramas of the past, it is resurrected as a symbol of love mis-configured as force, which Lazarus himself comes to recognize and discard under the guidance of his preacher friend, only to revive it in slimmer, jewelry form as a wedding gift to Rae. If the film presents a new vision of southern authenticity, this time leading the way in a national march toward racial reconciliation, its marketing does everything it can to subvert this vision by rekindling the smoldering ashes of baser “southern” passions. Raising the specter of a Mandingo-like threat to white womanhood from a hyper-masculine black man, the ad campaign re-places “the South” firmly in its past moment, as the perpetual site of potentially violent, if titillating, racial encounter. Christina Ricci, who believed she was doing “something important” in her role as Rae, described the promotional campaign as the greatest disappointment of her life (Rottenberg, “Christina Ricci”).

Perhaps encouragingly, audiences did not respond particularly positively to *Black Snake Moan*'s marketing call. The film was a box office failure. I'd like to reach, and it is something of a stretch, back to the lynching photographs for some clues to why. Similar to *Black Snake Moan*, lynching photographs represent iconic images of the black male body re-released after decades into a new public sphere. Controversy greeted collector James Allen's decision to exhibit and publish a coffee-table style book of his collection of lynching images as *Without Sanctuary* in 2000. With visual images, context is key. In the times that brought forth Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, lynching photographs asserted an absolute white power over terrifying black enfranchisement, reborn out of the ashes of Reconstruction. These images both arose out of and helped to create their own culture. Why then the near-universal feelings of outrage and shame *now*? The change of register had everything to do with a changing culture, symbolized by the shock and horror at the photographs of Emmett Till's lynching published in 1955. Since then, however, the vast majority of “trophy,” souvenir-type photos of previous lynchings went underground, buried in attic trunks, behind old bathroom mirrors, in flea market photo bins. That they are now resurrected to be compared to the Abu Ghraib prison photos in blogs, news outlets, and scholarly criticism is largely the work of collections like *Without Sanctuary*, which have reframed lynching photographs for a twenty-first century audience awash in the backlash rhetoric against affirmative action. If that audience now finds these photos shocking, unbelievable and unAmerican, it is not only because the culture has changed, but because the photographs have been forced back out into the public eye.

The implications of this re-circulation have been debated by cultural critics. Again, at issue is where and how the lynching photographs are finding—and creating—an audience. Despite much greater than expected attendance for exhibitions thus far, it has been a struggle to find willing venues for the Allen-Littlefield Collection. Displays like the ones mounted by the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh

in 2000 and the Martin Luther King Center in Atlanta in 2002 were preceded by months of community meetings and negotiations over content and approach. Community concerns have ranged from a fear that the images will "re-open old wounds" to a fear that bringing the images back into the light will reinforce the objectification and exploitation they represent. While Susan Sontag concurs that "the display of these pictures makes us spectators, too," she understands this dynamic as part of an ongoing "national project" of Euro-Americans to recognize the evils of American slavery and racism (*Regarding* 91-93). Here the lynching photographs serve a very different "nation-building" function than the one their makers intended. According to Sontag, such recognition constitutes a "great" but highly selective "benchmark of civic virtue" (*Regarding* 93). Recognizing the atrocities of American racist history confirms a modern notion of American-ness surpassing (triumphing over) past failings, whereas recognizing the atrocities of "disproportionate firepower" in American military history in the Philippines or Hiroshima, for example, "is very much not a national project" in our current wartime and displaying photographs of such "would be regarded—now more than ever—as a most unpatriotic endeavor" (*Regarding* 94). Despite some active misgivings, the well-attended exhibits of *Without Sanctuary* suggest that it is relatively safe to view these photographs as long as they are in a *new* nationalist frame. Only a nation secure in its currently reformed, moral status can afford to look at images that might question that status. If white Americans are implicated in images of self-righteous racist violence that now reads as atrocity, the clearly anti-racist formats in which those images can now be viewed may offer a sort of absolution. In contrast, any absolvatory gestures of *Black Snake Moan* were re-contained by its marketing campaign, which relied on "vintage" racist titillation without a hint of the revised "national project" in which the film takes its stand. *Black Snake Moan*'s advertising attempted to reassert iconic images of southern black masculinity, but found a changed cultural "reading" of those images: distaste, or at the very least, indifference. Simply stated the images did not mean like they used to, and absent any frame (such as irony) that might have made viewing such images "safe," audiences stayed away.

Of course, for African American lynching victims and their sympathizers, lynching photographs have needed no revised frame: they have always read as "atrocities," though it has taken a dozen decades for the American official transcript to reflect this reading. The shift has much to do with the increased political influence of African Americans, and perhaps the danger of ignoring it, but it also speaks to a relative degree of safety for Euro-Americans in the re-interpretation. African Americans have been officially accommodated in the cultural and military life of the nation: the election of a black president less than ten years later would work to confirm this. "They" are not likely to retaliate against "us": "they" are "us." Such a cultural shift is indeed represented in another popular culture evocation of the South's racial past, the 1990 remake of George Romero's 1968 classic *Night of the Living Dead*, which preceded the *Without Sanctuary* exhibits by nearly a decade. The original *Night* caused a sensation not only for its (for the time) extremely graphic horror, but for its racial politics. The film's pointedly sympathetic and competent black male hero, Ben, survives white infighting and fear-inspired paralysis to fight off the zombie onslaught and remain the last man standing. The film is set in western Pennsylvania, but in a scene clearly meant to critique the tragic backwardness of southern anti-civil rights violence, our hero is assumed to be a deadly zombie and is shot by white "rescuers." The 1990 remake follows the original story, with revisions (updates) that reflect new national developments and desires. Notably, the lead white female character, Barbra, is transformed from her perpetually cowering 1968 persona into a Jamie Lee Curtis-style 1990s heroine (played by Patricia Tallman) who recognizes, even above the black hero, what the right course of action should be. While Ben's best barricading plans are futile and he ultimately succumbs to zombification, Barbara successfully escapes to the safety of numbers, to a field where humans outnumber zombies and can—and do—systematically kill them off.<sup>8</sup> The new *Night* presents a revised ending that is apparently more in line with Romero's original intentions, deemed too controversial in 1968. The space where the new Barbara finds herself is a carnival-like scene of killing, populated by familiarly "red-neck" executioners. To bring a shock of recognition for both Barbara and the film's

<sup>8</sup> The 1990 remake changes the spelling of Barbra to "Barbara."

audience, the techniques used to kill the zombies are precisely those used by the lynchers of America's past. Zombies are piled and burned "alive" in bonfires, and strung up like "strange fruit" in hardwood trees, where they are riddled with bullets, apparently for the gratuitous pleasure of their white male tormenters. The film ends with a slide show montage of black and white images directly citational of lynching images. Here the sexualized racial violence of "the South" is explicitly evoked, but immediately sublimated through displacement—this is still western Pennsylvania and, more important, the southern black male bodies have been replaced by zombies. As Stephen Harper has noted, the zombies transmogrify in the remake from simple enemies of humans to "free-floating signifiers of sexual and racial oppression" (6). The outrage of such oppression, and complicitous guilt for it, is something that the national body (represented by Barbara) is ready to acknowledge. Barbara remarks: "They're us. They're us and we are them." "The South" is resurrected as a ghostly trace, enabling uncanny national self-recognition. The ghostly trace of "the South" remains profoundly useful here as a contrast or container of white racism, but in a much different way than for *Mandingo*. In *Night of the Living Dead* "the South" is transplanted to the U.S. heartland, reinserting a southern pastness into a national present, but with a feminist/liberal critique that might be considered "postsouthern."

Moving into our contemporary moment I want to offer one more popular culture text that also evokes southern racial abjection as a ghostly or monstrous trace, but this time in a pointedly southern setting. Season One of HBO's popular new series, *True Blood*, was developed and broadcast concurrently with the campaign and subsequent election of Barack Obama as president. Its basic premise is that, because the Japanese have finally figured out how to synthesize human blood, vampires no longer need to feed on live humans, and are thus able to emerge (when the sun goes down, of course) and integrate into human society. Where better to demonstrate the perils and bodily pleasures of this integration than "the South"? Set in the fictional town of Bon Temps, Louisiana, starring Stephen Moyer as Bill the former Confederate soldier turned vampire and Anna Paquin as Sookie Stackhouse, the mind-reading roadhouse waitress who comes to love him, *True Blood* is so thickly layered in southern racial, sexual, and religious iconography that, for reasons of space, I will restrict my analysis to "the South" on offer in its opening credits alone. To the tune of Jace Everett singing "I want to do bad things with you," these credits in the space of 90 seconds present a classic southern montage of exotic natural phenomenon (catfish, Spanish moss, bayous), religious ecstasy and river baptism, bar strip-tease sexuality, civil rights violence, and grotesque decay (animals and buildings decomposing) through a combination of vintage and faux documentary footage. Explicitly invoking the southern past of civil rights violence, the credits build what Scott Romine calls a "pseudocontinuity" (*Real South* 24) between past-South and ongoing sexual and religious extremism, which is in turn associated with the titillating threat of more civil rights violence, (best symbolized in a faux "God Hates Fangs" road sign featured half-way through the opening). *True Blood* offers "the South" as both haunted mansion and the avant-garde staging ground for contemporary civil rights dilemmas. In a series overdetermined by southernness, the southern past is continually evoked, but just as surely displaced. Again the historical subjects of past-South racial abjection—black bodies—have been thoroughly incorporated into the southern human population, and while "traditional" racism is often raised, it is in an ironic, self-aware (postsouthern, if you will) mode. Black males, in particular, seem in short supply; the only recurring black male character is a flaming homosexual short order cook and drug dealer. Grafting *Mandingo*'s interracial steaminess into a human/vampire matrix, *True Blood* presents southern nation as American nation in the throes of negotiating once again between its higher ideals and baser "traditions." A South that represents the ongoing presence of the past to be sure, but is also firmly in step, perhaps surpassing, the nation time of progressive liberalism.

Despite giving one of the most insightful speeches on race in American history when he was forced to,<sup>9</sup> Barack Obama in his presidential campaign roughly mirrored *True Blood*'s stance toward

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<sup>9</sup> Responding to his former pastor Jeremiah Wright's incendiary remarks on American racism, then-Senator Obama delivered a major address on the meanings of race and America, "A More Perfect Union," in Philadelphia, March 18, 2008. The speech has been generally praised as "historic."

history—invoking it everywhere yet nowhere. Of course, unlike *True Blood*, Obama cannot displace his own black male body; it remains front and center, evoking past legacies of racial oppression and triumph. At first glance, it is a historical body that seems resolutely to refuse southern contexts—born of a Kansan white mother and an African-African immigrant father in Hawaii, raised in Islamic Indonesia, Obama is a Harvard-educated Chicago activist who not only did *not* marry someone lighter than himself, but appears to be a savior for the image of non-dysfunctional heterosexuality and monogamy. Yet of course Obama's black masculinity is viewed within southern frames, whether at macro levels (as in discussions whether the country, epitomized by the red-state South, was "ready" to elect a black man) or micro. A caller to the local radio talk show in my hometown of Baton Rouge marveled at Obama's pro-choice stance, especially since his own mother had clearly made the "brave and difficult" choice not to abort him.<sup>10</sup> The show's guest speaker reminded the caller of the apparently unconceivable: that Obama's parents were married and he was a *wanted* mixed-race child. Obama's decisive victory in the general election, including historic wins in the southern states of Virginia, North Carolina, and Florida might be represented as Obama's successful appeal to the post-South South, a South in step with national time. Or, his decisive loss in all the other deep South states might be read as the past-South retrenching even further in isolation and irrelevance for desired narratives of national progress. In which ways has Obama himself positioned the South since becoming President?

Amid continuing anxieties about the "death of the South" (yet another post-southern condition) and perceived attacks on "family values," representations of southern culture as "traditional" again grounded national traditions of sexual and political conservatism as patriotic in the recent Bush era. On the other hand, representations of a South of backward poor, ignorant, and violent "bad apples" surely affected federal response to southern crises such as Hurricane Katrina, which effectively disavowed New Orleans as American. Barack Obama's repeated invocation of New Orleans and Katrina recovery, and his recent laying of a wreath at a memorial for black soldiers who fought for the Union in the Civil War, might be seen as an embrace of this alienated "minority" South, continuing a process Thadious Davis has described as "reclaiming the South" for African-Americans, and perhaps the nation. At the same time Obama's national electoral victory in spite of the near unified demurrer of Deep South states, and his aggressive attempts as president to reframe the terms of national security and patriotism might be said to show the nation is again in a progressive post-South mode. Very briefly I want to turn to one more set of photos that are themselves heavily inflected with the legacies of lynching and "the South"—the roughly 2000 images of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. The publication of some of these photos in 2004 once again raised the question of American identity—desired and "real"—on the national and international stage, and the question of whether to release the remaining sequestered images has proved one of the most controversial of Obama's young presidency. I want to suggest that especially when viewed in conjunction with the lynching photographs, the Abu Ghraib photographs and the rhetoric surrounding them set off a complicated dance of identification in which "the South" is a partner, with important ramifications for how and where the nation will ground itself in the future.

Hardly a week passed after their release in April 2004 before several writers noted disturbing parallels between the Abu Ghraib photos and lynching photos: the similar "trophy shot" quality to the images, the similar glee on the faces of the "guards," the similar degradation of "prisoner" bodies, the similar, grotesque sexual tension. In both cases, the sufferers of violence in the photos have, with rare exception, darker skins than their tormentors. In both cases, women sometimes appear as perpetrators or, less often, victims of torture. But in the years since, comparing the prison images of Abu Ghraib with American lynching photos has proven useful not only for seeing the common techniques they employ to turn racial "Others" into degraded, and thus degradable, objects. Behind the hideous content of these photographs is the serious work of building community—both for the "guardians" involved in staging and making the images and for our national culture. For the makers of the photographs, the function is

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<sup>10</sup> Jim Engster Show, February 19, 2009. WRKF-Baton Rouge, Louisiana. The guest speaker was the former President of Planned Parenthood, Faye Wattleton.

familiar: photographs both distinguish events as special and “normalize” them in a community setting, and making and sharing those photographs—either as cartes de memoir or jokes—with sympathetic audiences is a way of community bonding, against a degraded other, in this case. In the national arena, however, the photographs found little such sympathetic reception. Rather, the release of the photos called for urgent damage control for the nation’s image, within the nation and internationally. This called for narrative work, in which notions of a “past-South” played an important role.

Unlike the lynching photographs, the Abu Ghraib images were the subject of immediate public outrage, Senate hearings, (provisional) apologies, and criminal trials. Initial calls for the comprehensive release of all the images (to “get the worst behind us,” in Donald Rumsfeld’s terms) were grounded in a sense that presenting the photographs to the right audience—those who truly “understand the true nature and heart of America”—would effectively recontextualize them as isolated, and transcendable, incidents (“President Bush”). But whether that audience actually and reliably exists has been the source of anxiety. Some critics called for a closer scrutiny of the images, looking *with*, rather than at, the gaze of the Americans behind and in front of the camera (Wiegman “American Studies”). This “looking with” would of course be distinguished from the original intentions of the photographers or notions of a sympathetic audience. It is identification with a self-conscious, self-critical distance: non-transcendent, yet still implicitly nationalist, self-examination. Others rejected the need for such scrutiny, dismissing the impulse to examine the photographs (or the conduct they depict) as participating in an “orgy of self-condemnation” that risks derailing American national and military resolve, and may put U.S. soldiers at greater risk of attack (Sontag “Regarding”). President Obama initially strongly supported the former argument, which rhetorically positions a united nation rejecting and atoning for the abuse done in its name. After further consideration, and listening to the arguments of his military commanders, he changed his mind and has petitioned for blocking the release of the remaining images. Elsewhere I have made my own argument for the full release of the photos (“Atrocity or Nation-building?”). However, here I am less interested in revisiting these arguments than in examining the rhetoric behind Obama’s controversial decision.

In his statement to reporters, Obama emphasized his concern for American troop safety, presumably by inflaming anti-American sentiment internationally. He also, however, made a claim that the remaining images offered “not particularly sensational” and that they had served their purpose, which, he implied, is not national atonement but criminal prosecution (Malcolm). Stating that “the individuals who were involved have been identified, and appropriate actions have been taken,” Obama made a rhetorical return to Dick Cheney’s initial characterizations of the abuse as the work of a “few bad apples,” or as one of Bush’s other officials was quoted as saying, the work of “recycled hillbillies” (Hersh, 2004a, 41). Carol Mason has written compellingly of the “hillbilly defense” in American culture, which she defines as “an effort to deflect criticism of lethal American force and to deny that American extremism is systemic by directing public attention to hillbillies, those mountain folks [of the South] who are beyond the control of authorities because they are presumably beyond the reach of modernity’s civilizing influence. In other words, the hillbilly defense is a defense of the United States of America as a civilized nation”—where again “the South” with its eternal backwardness again plays a quarantining role for uncivilized behavior (39). Further, as Katherine Ledford has argued, the term “hillbilly” and the closely related “white trash” have in the process become internationalized, as in Independent (of London)’s headline about the scandal, “Blame the White Trash” and the UK’s Spectator’s discussion of the “hillbillies of Falluja.” On the national and international stage, Obama’s return to this logic signals that the United States is indeed not interested in acknowledging systemic problems with U.S. policy, instead preferring to deploy a familiar trope. The nation it seems will take one step back from *Night of the Living Dead* Barbara’s self-recognition, “They are us and we are them.” As he has previously responded when asked about prosecuting senior officials for such abuses, President Obama prefers to “look forward.” Of course, Mr. Obama would never characterize U.S. prisoner torture as the work of “hillbillies,” recycled or not; my point is that he doesn’t have to. But every notion of looking forward implies a backward, and in this case “the South” still serves to do the symbolic heavy lifting for America. Obama’s changing rhetoric

around these images indicates just how useful, and complicated, the notion of “the South” remains for the nation.

While, beyond vague fears of "re-opening old wounds," no one has cited national security as a reason *not* to view the *Without Sanctuary* photographs, national cohesion has been claimed as a reason *to* view them. The same week that the initial Abu Ghraib photographs were made public, the U.S. Justice Department announced it would reopen the Emmett Till murder investigation. While this move was the result of years of persistent effort by Till’s mother and her supporters, a cynic might note the timing of the announcement as a convenient contrast to the civil rights atrocities revealed in the Abu Ghraib photographs and a symbolic bolstering of the Bush administration's claim that the perpetrators of such crimes would (eventually) be brought to justice. The reinvestigation of Till's murder is part of the "national project" of finally prosecuting civil rights murders that has resulted in convictions in the killings of Medgar Evers and civil rights volunteers James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman. The role of the reissued lynching photographs in spurring these prosecutions, in reminding a new audience of the systematic violence of US racial oppression, is impossible to measure. But at least one effort at redress has been directly attributed to viewing *Without Sanctuary*. The chief sponsor of the Senate's June 2005 apology for failure to pass a federal statute against lynching were from the southern states of Virginia and Louisiana. Senator Mary Landrieu of Louisiana described her reaction to seeing the lynching photographs: "The intensity and impact of the pictures tell a story. . . . that written words failed to convey...It has been an extremely emotional, educational experience for me" (Thomas-Lester). Beyond an effort at retribution, senators have portrayed the resolution as an expression of "national character" and an effort to shore up the United States' reputation for human rights overseas (DeBose). The recontextualization of the lynching atrocity photographs as catalyst for justice thus functions as a photographic counter-weight to still-emerging images from Abu Ghraib and elsewhere in the "War on Terror." It remains to be seen whether it will be this progressive South or the past-South that ultimately best grounds the nation.

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