

**DOUBLE-CLICK TO SHOW WHITE SPACE**

**A COLLECTION OF PAPERS ON SOUTHERN IDENTITY**

**BY THE FALL '07 AMERICAN STUDIES CLASS  
“(RE)CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY IN THE POST-MILLENNIAL SOUTH”  
AT KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY**

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## Preface – Essay Assignment

Dr. Dede Yow

“Grace Hale declares that we must see “The South,’ the ‘race problem,’ the ‘burden of history,’ not as the weight of some other . . . but as a burden that we still carry.” Understanding this region demands that we face our history. In doing so, she concludes, “We would have to see ourselves.”

Toni Morrison has said that we must confront our ghosts to “make the past palatable.”

In our readings, viewings, and discussions, what history have we faced? What ghosts have we confronted? How do you define “Southern Identity”?

Bring your own research and thinking into your answer. Think of Nat Turner resurrected by William Styron and Jim Crow by James Baldwin. Consider those people coming back to a post-Civil Rights South in Carol Stack’s story. But don’t forget “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow” and Dana’s journeys to recover her past and frame her present. Think about Mammy’s evolution from Twelve Oaks to modern Atlanta. Bring in current images that reflect the South today.

Most importantly, speak in your voice and tell your truth as you see it at the end of this journey this semester.”

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## Southern Identity

by Ayanna Baker

As a native Northerner, I am unsure whether I have the right or innate ability to define Southern identity. For me answering this question may be as offensive to a native Southerner as William Styron’s depiction of Nat Turner is to me as an African-American. My family roots lie in the South and initially I did not believe this class would add a significant amount of knowledge of Southern culture to what I had learned from my family. I was wrong. After a semester long journey into Southern Identity in the antebellum South I find myself more versed in Southern history, traditions, and culture than I was before entering this class. As an African-American woman living in the South, I find myself walking a tight rope each day between who I truly am and what is socially acceptable for blacks to do and say in the South. The honest truth is that as a Black American in the South my civil liberties are not guaranteed or as equally protected as white’s rights are by the

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local, state, or federal government. Unfortunately, the federal government has begun to excise themselves of state matters concerning race, and as a result many blacks in the South find their civil liberties becoming more encroached upon without reproach or protection from our federal government.

As I review the course I take in works such as James Baldwin’s *Going to Meet the Man*, Richard Wright’s *Ethics of Living Jim Crow*, and Grace Hale’s *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South: 1890-1940* and I am saddened to see the ideas and values of the Old South transformed in the New South reemerge without consequence. In these writings we have discussed the history of segregation following emancipation in the South. We reviewed numerous cases of lynching and other modes of physical violence that were used to enforce segregation and create white space in the South. As we faced the past in class I saw remnants of

it creeping into our present. In his autobiographical account *Ethics of Living Jim Crow* Wright makes it clear that as a black man he could not depend on the law to protect his civil rights. Ironically, years later after the death of Jim Crow, cases of racial discrimination including the encroachment of civil liberties are steadily increasing in the South. As a black I worry about the reemergence of the Southern Identity of whiteness. I worry about the forceful reemergence of what Grace Hale identifies as white spaces, such as the white tree in Jena, Louisiana. When a new black student inquired about sitting under the tree (a white space) a noose was hung from the tree as a warning and symbol of old traditions and norms. Even in Douglas County, Georgia where the population is approximately 30-40 percent black old Southern traditions of oppression persist in more socially acceptable ways such as the unprecedented sentencing of black teenagers like Genarlo Wilson for the crime of engaging in consensual oral sex with a teenage girl who happened to be white. White Southerners who yearn for the old days of the Confederacy hold on to the old societal roles of blacks and white. As they attempt to enforce those traditions today in more socially acceptable forms I wonder if the ghosts of the past: slavery, lynching, and Jim Crow could truly lead to a desegregated future for the South. I have lived in the South for nine years and can not say that I believe the ghosts of the past do not persist into the present.

Throughout the semester we discussed the theme of paternalism and the mammy figure in many of our readings. I believe the ideas of paternalism between characters such as Dana and Rufus, and William Robbins and Henry Townsend still pervade current Southern thought. The mammy figure is also still prevalent in the minds of many Southerners. Grace Hale addresses the correlation between the mammy figure and racial distinction in the

Southern home. She finds that although many whites are fond of their mammies, the mammy figure continued to foster cultural, moral, and racial superiority. During my oral history interview, Rebecca Radvack spoke of her family's relationship with their black workers Mr. Hitler and Ms. Lizzie. The relationship she described clearly demonstrated Southern views of paternalism and the black mammy figure. Although Rebecca seemed to be very fond of Ms. Lizzie and Mr. Hitler that same fondness did not extend to any other blacks. Outside of Ms. Lizzie and Mr. Hitler racial distinctions of lack of class, culture, and intelligence continued to apply to other blacks.

I believe for many Southerners that Southern identity is still rooted in the color boundaries and mannerisms from the Old South. Some white Southerners may look at the past and describe slavery, accounts of lynching, and Jim Crow as a time that was not that bad for blacks. The history of the South is still romanticized by many Southerners and spoken of in terms of endearment amidst the brutality of the era. We live in a time when poverty persists in many black communities in the South, and oppressive measures of the Old South remain in place through state and local government officials (of both races). Nevertheless, many Southerners choose to stay. Some leave but inevitably return to make a difference, to create a better world for their children to grow up in. Carol Stack's *A Call to Home* depicts a group of people's unwavering desire to improve their lot and make what they call their home better. Southern history is the accumulation of events and the memories of both blacks and whites. The history of one race is inextricably woven to the other. Nevertheless, color defines the South and that leads me to believe that white Southern identity is vastly different from black Southern identity. One identity may be filled with pride while the other still struggles to find theirs.

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## Reflections on Southern Identity

by Jessica Killereas

I have lived in the South my entire life, along with my family; the majority of which have also lived in the South for decades. I have known Wild Man, and his unwillingness to allow blacks in his Civil War memorabilia

store. I've known friends of my father who participated openly in KKK rallies, and family rules that forbade the dating of black men. I've known potluck Sunday lunches at the church, and baptisms at the lake. I know trailer parks,

broke down cars, and having to sell off cows to pay for the tractor. I know you bring food when there's going to be a funeral, I know how to season a skillet, and I know that it's polite to ask about someone's health, but only if you have time to hear every calamity that ever struck the family tree. What I didn't know, was that this is not just a part of my identity, but a part of the regional identity of the American South.

The history of this region is ingrained in its people. Whether natives of the South or transplants, most people are aware of the stereotypes that Southerners have. However, as we've seen in our readings this semester, the South has not constructed its identity around stereotypes. We started with a look at Gone With the Wind, presenting the typical antebellum glory of a Southern Utopia. We then saw Alice in Octavia E. Butler's Kindred commit the ultimate form of resistance against power. We've seen Pearl and other characters in E. L. Doctorow's The March build new lives from the burnt wreckage of the old.

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Nat Turner informed us that history is written by the powerful, and that success can only be measured against time. Grace Hale enlightened our class on the conflicting instances of segregated integration, and opened our eyes to the brutality of Southerners intent on keeping their old ways of life. James Baldwin showed our class how violence could be perpetrated by generation after generation, and how bittersweet the division between hatred and desire. In Carol Stack's Call to Home, we watched as people tried to come together and create a new home in a New

South that they could help construct, a place so seemingly broken that it held potential for complete redesign.

In our readings, and in the oral history assignment, it has become obvious that Southerners hold a shared Southern identity. It is one built up from manners, respectability, resistance, racial divisions, economic struggle, religion, work, and resilience. The legacy of the South is one filled with conflict, and hope for an ideal life in a region filled with potential.

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## Southern Identity

by Chavonne Stewart

In our class, we have faced the history of all Americans whether Southern born or not. We all wear the cloaks of injustice towards mankind. However, our focus for this class was about the South. This class was designed with uniqueness. It is unique because of the technique in which we were allowed to see Southern history. A historian would have used non-fiction writing as the grounds for approaching this class and history. Instead of using the historian's approach, our professor was non-conventional and we read great works in the science-fiction category like *Kindred* and fiction category with *The Known World*. Each novel seemed so realistic, especially *Kindred*. Its realism engaged the

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reader; as the reader, you could relate to the character of Dana or Rufus. At some point in time, we have all dreamed about going back to the past. *Kindred* allowed us to imagine ourselves in the 1830s.

Even though the novels were fiction, like *The March*, there were many themes within each. One of the most important themes in *The March* and *The Known World* is freedom for the slaves at any cost. In Doctorow's novel, he gave us characters like Pearl, a young girl without a family anymore. Pearl understands that as long as she is with the Union forces she is free. Pearl has the desire to reach the North and to become educated. In *The Known World*, Moses helped his wife to freedom. Although the novels were

fiction, we know that blacks sought freedom during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In our readings we confronted many ghosts. I believe our ghosts were literal. First they haunt us in human form. These ghosts will always remind us of the evils of segregation. They are a result of what is known as vigilante violence. Young Emmitt Till, Sam Hose, and the *Without Sanctuary* website show us the gruesomeness of lynching, burning, and tar-and-feathering. Since we have photos of the wicked practices of whites, we see the twisted mindset of whites. They had body parts on display and the creation of postcards. These images will always haunt us. Another form of ghosts is the language used in the past. Derogatory words used to describe African Americans. These words are coon or nigger. The definition of beauty has haunted us in the past and present-day. African American features were not accepted as beautiful. To have thick lips, dark skin, wide noses, and curvaceous hips was not the mark of the beautiful. Whites believed we had features of the ape or monkey. In the entertainment industry, blackface was used to mock the features of African Americans and was done by whites. Degrading the self-image of African Americans forced those who could pass for white to try to do so. However, there were those who chose not to. They remained a part of the community. They worked to try to make a difference within the community. Those people were Walter White, W.E.B. Dubois, and Alonzo Herndon.

Yet, I believe language hurts us the most. Out of language, whites had or created an attitude of racial superiority. They believed the white Anglo-Saxon was the supreme race. Whites attempted to do all they could to make blacks feel inferior. One of the ways they used language was the formation of laws. There are still laws on the books that demean African Americans. Plessy vs. Ferguson of 1896 is out of commission but it is there to remind us of the past. Separate but equal would become the theme for the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Signs would have verbiage to determine what coloreds could use. Black students went to separate schools and churches, and in some cities they had their own businesses. The overturning of the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>

and 15<sup>th</sup> amendments remains in our history books to remind us that Reconstruction did not last as long as it should have. Because it did not, African Americans were forced into a new form of slavery known as Jim Crow. As a result of Jim Crow, the South would create new codes for African Americans to follow. Finally, compare the history books of the past and present. African Americans of the 19<sup>th</sup> century are portrayed as the happy-go-lucky slave.

The aspects above are only a few of the puzzle pieces that create "Southern Identity." Southern identity is represented by each individual's personal experiences and attributes. Throughout my entire life, I have never been asked this question until now: "How do you define "Southern Identity"?" I had to repeat the question several times and meditate. I have always held true to my Southern roots. My respect for being a Southerner has grown, especially after I lived in upstate New York. I did not want to be associated with the North or to be called a Northerner. I knew that I loved Georgia's hot summers and not-so-cold winters. Georgia is enriched with pecan trees, peach orchards, red clay, and the smell of honeysuckle. Our rainy season is marked by downpours while the sun continues to shine.

To begin, my Southern identity is defined by my family roots. In the last year, I have had the opportunity to view census records for Georgia. So far, I have been able to trace my family history back to about 1870. Event though I only have names and estimated birthdates, the roots have been laid. The most incredible thing about the census was that I could trace on both of my dad's side mother and father and the same with my mom. In doing so, I can say my family has lived in Georgia for over a hundred and thirty years. I know for a fact that they have dwelled in Atlanta, Lithonia, Woodville, Jasper County and Bibb County.

Next, my identity is represented by the food I eat. I was always told by my parents and grandparents they ate everything from the land. Even with animals, they spared no parts. So I remember my grandparents cooking chitlin's, tripe, pig feet and ears, rabbit, deer and the normal meats like chicken, fish and beef. Although I only eat the normal meats, the other

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are apart of my family and a way of life. It's ironic because they ate the cheapest fish like mullet or catfish. My mom told me it was a luxury to be able to have something else. My mom's dad grew up on a farm; so they grew their own vegetables. I remember my Big Momma, my mother's mom, talking about the cows and chickens. She said one day the cow got away and her granddad had to chase after him.

In addition to the meats, we ate collard greens, turnips and the roots, macaroni and cheese, beans and peas and more. I remember Big Daddy having tomato plants on his front porch. Lastly, the church played a role in my Southern upbringing and identity. The sound of gospel music playing every Sunday morning was a real treat. As an adult, when times seem the most difficult; the sweet sounds of gospel music uplifts my spirits.

Finally, my identity is characterized by an inner strength and good Southern hospitality.

Although I do not know my entire family history, it is safe to say that they have endured. I have a will within me to overcome adversity. I come from a family of predominantly women who are caring givers, strong, intelligent and hardworking. They watch out for each other and the communities around them. My family fits into many of the contexts of history we have studied. I think the most significant reading would be Carol Stack. In the past, I had great uncles and a great grandfather who migrated North in the 1930s and 40s looking for better opportunity. While all my great uncles returned to the South after retirement, my great grandfather remained in Detroit. Yet, he made sure he returned home every two years to visit, go fishing and to be a part of the Southern air. My aunt said it best in the oral history: no matter where you might travel and visit, there is no place like home.

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## Southern Identity

by Chris Smith

The challenge to me in these two subjects, race and Southern identity, has been to personalize them. I can honestly say that I have a hard time understanding most of it – it has a quality of cognitive dissonance, particularly at the pitch that Grace Hale, James Baldwin, and such films as *Eyes on the Prize* deliver it. It seems to me like something that must have happened on another planet, or in some ancient civilization. It is difficult for me to constantly retrieve the awareness that all of this is real and active in our everyday lives, here in the classroom, and certainly at a central place in any study of American culture. I have been very far removed from this sort of thing for much of my life, partly because I happened to be born pink (I renounce the term and concept “white”) but also because my experience didn't contain the paradigms. I was raised in the arts community among painters, sculptors, writers, and old ex-communist social workers, in a home where the very concept of viewing someone negatively through a racial, gender, or other preconceived lens was unthinkable, not in a moralistic sense

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but simply because none of the people in that social group would have even spoken in that sort of idiom, although in hindsight I'm sure many of them had strong prejudices. Although my parents were Calvinists, the community was pointedly inclusive – various races, eccentricities, preferences, etc. A character that stands out is one family friend who was completely tattooed and had many piercings (in the late 1960s, before that was cool), always wore black leather (and I now realize was openly gay). He was clearly different, and people would kid him about that, but he was not “lesser than” or looked down on. He was a fascinating writer and musician and everyone was always glad to see him show up. In that environment, I couldn't have imagined someone saying that people from other countries, or of other colors, were inferior. It's taken me years to realize that the ad hoc arts community, as a lifestyle, is often an association of “others” who value their differences, often obsessively, and generally respect and value the differences of other people more than many sectors of the mainstream public.

As naïve as it sounds, I don't remember perceiving racial discrimination until I saw it as a teenager. I grew up in the West and Midwest and was rarely around racially polarized situations that I was aware of. The first real experiences of racism I had (and I have to point out that it was Southern racism, even though I wasn't in the South), were in working on large power-plant construction sites in the 1970s and 80s. Most of the workers were from the South (they say you can learn to weld just by driving through South Carolina), and 90% were white. It took me a while to learn the language, for instance that when someone talked about L.A., they meant "Lower Alabama," and to understand the jokes and cultural references. The first rule was that the South was a sacred place, to be spoken of with awe, the sort of place that one would have a body returned to so it could lie in the soil of the homeland. I quickly realized, though, that a lot of these people overtly hated black people, along with Asians, Mexicans, Europeans, Puerto Ricans, Yankees, Californians, and basically anyone who wasn't a Southern white American. Of course women were often portrayed in a similar, negative way, but that's a different subject.

Some of the anglocentric stuff was partly misguidedly funny, Southern-culture grits humor and some was in a satirical tone, but a lot of it was just serious bigotry and hate speech and it was constant, the material of every conversation. There were exceptions, but they were under cover – one-on-one with me, someone might protest a particularly awful joke someone told or an insult to a black or female worker, but in groups these people did not critically discuss race relations the way they might talk about politics or job issues. It was a closed subject, and the ideology was that non-whites were inferior and had a whole library of special characteristics, shortcomings, and tendencies. I have to admit that, at that point in my life, I just wanted to get my paycheck and go home, and so although I abhorred the attitudes and shunned the worst of it, I didn't really interfere. Perhaps one thing that kept me from reacting more was that the black and Mexican workers seemed to be OK with it all; I never saw anyone talk back or complain about racist jokes or their obviously lower job status. Women were a

different story – the conversation was always adjusted in their presence so they wouldn't "go crying to the management." Of course I realize now that the people of color were "going along to get along" – they needed the job, and that culture was what they would find on almost any big construction site.

In the years since then, as I've learned more American history and particularly the new revisionist work from "Wounded Knee" and "Black Elk Speaks" up to Howard Zinn's "People's History" and Frank Takaki's "Different Mirror," the waves of shock have hit me over and over again. Historically and currently, this is not the society I thought it was before I was twenty, and that imaginary world is gone, not only because that unique community is

rare but because we have lost many of the crucial gains that the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw. From the New Deal through the late 1960s, there was a steady pressure on conservative, white America to drop its isolationist, hermetic ideas and embrace the

whole community. The depression brought the poor and the lower working classes into the "we" group, and the civil rights movement finally brought black Americans into the public dialogue as equally valuable people who had endemically, structurally, been treated as lesser than. We began to be ashamed of our international image – in the 1970's, Frantz Fanon would call us "that nation of lynchers," and at least some of us would flinch.

Much of that ethic of fairness has disappeared from the public dialogue, replaced by divisive, formal mechanisms of legal equality and external correctness. The deaths of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy closed an era of radical, powerful talking back, an intellectual and irrefutably ethical narrative at the center of public life and consciousness that maintained the pressure for change and shattered the most common racist and classist myths as often as they were constructed. The election of Ronald Reagan institutionalized and codified the return to American internalization as a white, middle class, economically dominant group that had to stick together so those poor people, those black people, those liberals, those women, don't take our stuff, don't steal these scarce opportunities that our forefathers obtained through sacred nation-building. The

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use by the Bush administrations of fear, security issues and what Naomi Klein calls the “Shock Doctrine” has driven us collectively farther back into nationalism, jingoism, and worse.

The South is still noticeably the site of cultural production for a lot of racist and sexist thought, and still houses a fringe culture of genuine hate-mongers and a larger, secondary group that holds an affection for a blurry, ambiguous vision of the South as a noble heritage and source of identity, what Henry Nash Smith calls *The Myth of the Garden*, and by contact often acquires the racism and hate language of the hard-core white supremacists. I don't believe, however, that the South is very different now from the rest of the country as far as structural racism, inflexible cultural barriers, and the retrograde motion of the public belief in human rights and equality.

An odd feature of the change is that where in 1950 that group was made up almost entirely of white men because they had 95% of the political voice and cultural authority, it now contains many more women and people of color. Many of these people stand with the dominant group and assimilate to share the benefits, and they become, ethically, white men for the purpose of voting. In that process, they have much greater power than a dissenter, because the success of their group leads them to vote “early and often” because they believe the system works. Those with opposing views vote less and less, because it seems pointless. For instance, some black

women may see themselves first as middle class American and connect their interests with a narrow interpretation of individual human value based on the (white) American Exceptionalist narrative of the superior individual rising to success despite obstacles, and therefore the unsuccessful person being inferior by nature. Another black woman may take a strong stand and aggressively interrogate structural racism and sexism – but increasingly in this society, she will often be vilified and demonized as an “example of what those liberal entitlement-mindset people are like.”

So my take on race at the end of this fascinating journey this semester is still one of the boy who had no experience of discrimination and just thought it was interesting and aesthetically pleasing that people were all different colors. I hold onto that naïve image because it is still what makes sense to me. At the same time, I struggle to understand and deal with the fact that, when I sit in a classroom with a person of color, the whole awful history of slavery, racism, hatred and murder sits between and around us and determines much of our experience of each other, and the fact that we may not be actors in any of it doesn't make it go away. In fact, it is wrong to dismiss it; it is not my place to dismiss it. And more than that, I struggle as a citizen and an aspiring writer with what I can do personally to change it all, even a little. As of today, I don't have an answer for that.

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## Southern Identity

by LaRondra West

In our readings, viewings, and discussions in this course, we have faced the reality of the hurts, pains, embarrassment, anger, and so many other emotions that the South has caused over its journey throughout history. The fantasized and fictional world is no longer there, as the real truth unfolds in each piece of literature we have explored this semester. I feel that the South is not taking responsibility for what it has done. Not acknowledging the wrong will only leave room for the same errors to occur. The South will not escape the horrors and lift the heavy burden

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of its past until it comes face to face with the reality of history. It is no longer fictional accounts, but real events and experiences that have damage lives forever. The South continues to push off the issues of the past that are resurfacing in events today. What is the history or past of the

South? Racism, discrimination, white supremacy, etc. are all issues and problems of the past that the South hasn't fully dealt with. Take the Jena 6 incident for instance. It occurred in the heart of the South,

Louisiana. Racism, nooses, hatred, and injustice are happening today in the younger generations

because of lack of factual and real teachings on historical events. Instead of addressing the noose incident when it first occurred, it was seen as a minor joke with no regards to the feelings of the directed party. This one action has escalated into a huge controversy that is sweeping the nation and news stations all over the country. If the individuals who did the prank were taught the history behind the noose, they probably would time, with some saying that racism doesn't even exist. I say walk in the shoes of a person of color one day, not just an African American, but Korean, Iranian, Chinese, or any other minority. It will be seen that discrimination stills exists in 2007. Racism and discrimination has taken on a new face. It is no longer lynching, slavery, and no civil rights, but it is getting pulled over by the cops for driving an expensive car, being followed in the store, and not receiving adequate service at a restaurant because of your skin color. No wonder the ghost of racism and discrimination is still around and is haunting the minds of those who want to forget that it ever happened.

have thought twice before doing it or maybe they knew exactly what the noose represented and wanted to send a message to the black community. As seen in the Jena 6 case, the black community is standing up to the cluster of negative racial images and treatment that they have put up for so many years from the white community.

A lot of people say that the South has made great advancements from its past to the present. Wanting to forget history will not solve the problem and make it go away. I think each novel that we read, each film that we viewed, were all great illustrations of what occurred in the South and how the South's identity was shaped.

I define Southern identity in many terms. When I think of the South, more than racism and discrimination come to mind. When I think of the South, good Southern cooking, religion, hospitality, and family are just some of the things I see. I think of a distinct dialect and beautiful land for miles and miles. The South is a region like no other.