The Weird South: Ecologies of Unknowing in Postplantation Literature. By Melanie Benson Taylor. U of Georgia P, 2025, 98 pp.

This slim, densely theoretical volume muses on recurrent heterotopias, liminal spaces, or "limbos" in the literary post-bellum US South, through close readings of Katherine Anne Porter, Charles Chesnutt, Richard Wright, and Jesmyn Ward. Melanie Benson Taylor lays out a plan to re-examine stereotypical sites of the Southern Gothic: the cemetery, the haunted house, and the plantation. Drawn from the 2022 Eugenia Dorothy Blount Lamar Memorial Lectures given at Mercer University, the book focuses on two themes in particular: the grave and the womb. Her project is deconstructionist, seeking to peel away oppositions between these seeming binary opposites, to render them cousins, exploring "the frail perforations between the living and the (un)dead" (69).

Taylor admits from the start that the book has no clear thesis. It instead offers "a poetics and a politics of witness" (xviii), opening with a beautiful unpacking of Porter's 1934 short story "The Grave," in which two Texan children play in their grandfather's empty grave, collecting a gold ring and a coffin nail, then shoot a pregnant rabbit, examine its unborn bunnies, pack them back inside the mother, and bury her, promising to tell no one of their "secret." Given that Porter's mother died in childbirth when she was very young, it would be easy to see the story's symbols as emblems of the choices faced by women in the 1930s: marriage and childbirth or death. Taylor offers a more sophisticated reading, moving between neo-Lacanian interpretation and stylistics, to explore "a stunning panorama of the suppressed but unrestful histories" of the South – and also of the greater United States, for which the South has historically been a foil and scapegoat for its acts of repression and racial and sexual violence. She extends this to cover "startling revelations about our shared collusion in so many of the systems we might think we can or should reject" (9). Her readings use an anthropological lens (she is a firm critic of new materialism) and focus on a post-humanist Anthropocene. She outlines dangers here: Proceeding this way, we risk fetishizing "the unseen, the unknown, the unthought" or risk romanticizing "the nonhuman and object world," as we "often try to rescue subjugated others from the clutches of imperialistic human functions" (3). Working mainly with texts from the early twentieth century, each section of her book is colored by current politics and ecological thinking. It draws influence from Timothy Morton's *Dark Ecology* (2016) to make connections between "agricultural exhaustion, animal extinctions, chattel slavery, even genocide" (13), or between chattel slavery, Indigenous removal, and white "modern southern anxieties about nativism and dispossession" (16), the latter evident in Por-

ter's story. Taylor suggests the impetus for the story came from Porter's time in Mexico, a transnational setting which allowed a loosening of the lock on its ghastly images.

The volume's second section, "The Trees," explores, through Chesnutt's story "The Dumb Witness" (written in 1897 but first published in a posthumous edition of *The Conjure Woman*), "what happens when the raw materials that compose our social lives – the earth, the trees, the organisms, the mechanisms – collapse into the structures and the bodies we inhabit" (32). "Weird southern texts," Taylor writes, depict trees as living creatures, as sites of lynchings, as the wooden furniture and homes we live inside, and also as "coffins for our secrets" (32). Exploring racial "color as a hypervisible signifier of an often utterly immaterial condition," she writes, "was Chesnutt's passion" as an African American author who easily might have (but refused to) pass as white, even at the risk of his career. "The Dumb Witness" is set on a former plantation in eastern North Carolina, where a white homeowner cannot find the deed to the house because its secret hiding place is known only to his former slave (and probable cousin), whom he beat, rendering her mute. The joke's on him: On his death, his cousin speaks up, revealing the spot to his inheritor. For years, while he dug up his fields searching for the deed, it was in a compartment in the seat of his chair. Digging in the earth, he tries to penetrate the secret of his Black, mute cousin, but both withhold it. Unhurriedly, Taylor shifts between unpacking Chesnutt's prose and elucidating the ontological risks of becoming "accidental allies of capitalism," and the importance of our holding ourselves accountable for our own human narcissisms (44). She proposes a "new materialism with a dark twist": "a critique of capitalist conversion with no romantic exits or alternative ways of being apart from its collapsed architecture" (44).

As a scholar of Native American literature, Taylor keeps historical issues of Indigenous people close in the background throughout her work, even when they are not treated directly. The mute woman is rumored to be part Native American. From this, Taylor suggests that white or Black identification with Indigenous groups and their struggles is often a way to escape hard realities and to feign being oneself in a heterotopia in which Indigenous causes are romanticized. One senses the depth of thought that's gone into the volume. Much is said, much left unsaid. The language, however, is often rough to follow: "What these weird southern ontologies encourage us to see simultaneously are the placebound ravages of ecomaterialist embeddedness within racial capitalist economies, alongside the invitations to conceptualize personhood by logics instilled in deep time rather than in Anthropocenic coordinates, and in modes beyond the technology of the pen or the computer or the strictly literary" (47) – all this followed by a long footnote.

The text examined next is Wright's *The Man Who Lived Underground*, completed in 1942 and published posthumously by Wright's daughter in 2021. Taylor notes Paula Rabinowitz's suggestion that US Depression-era literature's spaces "between industrial and residential zones, between men and women, between workers and their bosses, between races, between parents and their children – while sharply visible, still tangibly in effect, could no longer be counted on to signify as they once had" (Rabinowitz 33). Wright's protagonist, wrongly arrested by police and tortured in agonizing scenes of copious description, "receives his abuse in the liminal space between the white world above and the dark obscurity below, between waking and dreaming, incarceration and emancipation" (51). Taylor alludes to how this echoes what often happens to Black and Brown bodies in the United States today, suggesting this space is like that of Wright's illustrated *12 Million Black Voices* (1941), showing post-plantation Great Migration-era African Americans in a "harrowing space between the plantation and the city, slavery and freedom, the coin of opportunity and of social death" (51). Wright's protagonist is taken home to find his wife in labor, during which visit he evades arrest, sneaking through a manhole into an underground sewer system. Taylor suggests that Wright's pairing of the pregnant woman, with the child buried inside her ready to come to life, and burial is common to Porter's story with the grandfather's grave and the pregnant rabbit. Graves are cradles, cradles graves. The protagonist realizes that his situation is that of everyone on earth and that everyone on earth's situation is also his, a revelation causing him to forget his own name, affirming rather than releasing him from "the made world's logics and violence" (56). Post-plantation modernism and the Great Depression, Taylor writes, both "eradicate and ossify [racial] difference all at once and in turn" (57), in a world where "guilt is determined by identity rather than agency" (71).

The volume's last section, "The Forest," treats Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017). Here, a child protagonist is driven to pick up his father from prison and, on the ride back, takes home a ghost, which comes to live in the family's basement, singing "songs without words," a hymn beautiful "despite and perhaps because of its untranslatability" (60). One thing that plagues southern literature, Taylor suggests, is a pervasive impulse toward "precolonial, precapitalist and antimodern idylls or spiritual systems" (62). Yet identifying with such tropes borders on the ridiculous, as they have been "manufactured by the very systems we're trying to escape" (62). Taylor makes her point across issues of race and environment. Uncanny ruptures or haunted spaces cannot "simply be restored by sweeping myths of 'sustainability' or undifferentiated celebrations of posthuman assemblage" (63). Southern literature unflinchingly labors (one suspects the metaphor is intentional) to unveil uncanny horrors, whether of class, race, gender, or environment. Unlike much feminist, antiracist, and decolonial criticism, it is skeptical "of the reparative mode as a strategy for healing trauma or

confronting division," cautioning us "about indulging in fantasies of redemption via the appealing features of biotic solidarity, . . . romanticized reunions with natural and nonhuman otherworlds" (63). Stripping away "the prostheses of modernity," we find ourselves to be just things like any other things in our world, "parts capable of disassembly" (83). In a weird South, "the logics of propriation do not loosen their grip without struggle or causalities," as "the concept of relationality works only if the playing field is truly leveled" (74). The weird South asks us "to revisit and revise two of its most essential conceits: those of land and race, apart and intertwined" (74). "Weird southern texts present us with the ghostly hauntings of fixed locations" and also "radically exceed them" in terrifying unmoorings. Their authors ask us to be here, now, but also someplace and sometime else. Reality may not be legible, Taylor writes, but stories are our shared real.

Works Cited

Rabinowitz, Paula. "'Between the Outhouse and the Garbage Dump': Locating Collapse in Depression Literature." *American Literary History*, vol. 2–3, no. 1, 2011, pp. 32–55.

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Faulkner's Hollywood Novels: Women between Page and Screen. By Ben Robbins. U of Virginia P, 2024, 295 pp.

In his 1975 "Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre," Fredric Jameson proposed that narrative genres contain imaginary resolutions to real social contradictions and conflicts. Following this claim, in her sociological analysis of one example of the romance genre, E. L. James's *Fifty Shades of Grey*, Eva Illouz concluded that the novel's central relationship "functions narratively as a resolution to the tensions inherent in modern heterosexuality" (66). While many contemporary readers are familiar with the *Fifty Shades* film series, and the discussions of its heroine's femininity and sexuality, today's audiences may be less familiar with Hollywood cinema from the 1930s, '40s and '50s, even though films from this period, being more numerous and diverse, can be analysed in similar, if more complex, ways in terms of gender and sexual politics in