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SOUTHERN NATIONALISM – AN ANTI-YANKEE VERSION OF AMERICANNES

*After all, Southerners have been
Americans too, of a sort.**
John Shelton Reed

To write about the Southern identity is to run the risk of trapping oneself in banalities or generalizing in absolute terms, or, worse still, of perpetuating the monocultural integrity of the South as well as pro-South and anti-South stereotypes. After all, the very idea of the American South as a separate, culturally and politically unique entity has been put into question either as a convenient, sentimentalized, reactionary or almost fascistic fiction, or a disruptive force distorting the neat picture of the United States of America. "There may be real and enduring cultural differences between Southerners and other Americans", suggests John Shelton Reed in *The Enduring South*, a comparative study of the South and the non-South in the United States, done from a sociological point of view; the tentativeness of his phrasing must strike those readers who are used to clear-cut boundaries and oppositions in the field of contemporary American Studies.¹

Michel Foucault has made it clear that history favors the official, mainstream version and at the same time easily excludes "particular, local, regional knowledge."² The problem with the American South is its dubious, ambiguous status as a repository of knowledge. True, the region counters the

* J. S. Reed, *Instant Grits and Plastic-Wrapped Crackers: Southern Culture and Regional Development*. In *The American South: Portrait of a Culture*, ed. Louis D. Rubin, Jr., United States Information Agency, Forum Reader Series, 2nd edition, Washington 1991, p. 28.

¹ J. S. Reed, *The Enduring South. Subcultural Persistence in Mass Society*. With a new afterword by the author. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1986, p. 32.

² M. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1980, p. 82.

dominant, unified and heavily ideologized story of Americanness, but in order to be able to continue its everlasting struggle for distinctiveness it repeatedly creates its own totalizing master narrative, in which suspicion or even hate have too often provided the sole basis for self-definition.

In what seems a bizarre mixture of the discourses of culture, history, politics and economy, the South, "an alibi for Northern whites",³ is either contrasted with or juxtaposed to the U.S.A. Whichever "technique" may prevail, it is important to observe that whereas in the nineteenth century the American South "offered a regional geography against which the more abstract body of the 'new American' could be articulated,"⁴ throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century it has continued to serve political agendas on both Southern and the non-Southern sides. In other words, from the political point of view the alleged distinctiveness or non-distinctiveness of the South has provided yet another argument in deciding whether the region should contemplate more or less radical forms of secession from the U.S. empire.

In their fight for political, economic, and cultural independence in the 19th century, the United States and the American South shared a conviction that the ultimate victory would depend on the severing of ties with their oppressors, the British crown and the federal government of the U.S.A., respectively. The consciously subordinated, self-styled role of a victim must obviously be seen in the suitable historical contexts and it raises immediate doubts and questions as to whether one can convincingly qualify the U.S.A. as a postcolonial country which had to shake off the domination of the British empire both in the economic and in the cultural sphere in order to gain full independence. For the purpose of the present analysis it is even more important to establish whether the American South could be included in the postcolonial theory. Bolder still, even if the opposition: colonized South vs. imperial North has not been generally recognized, it is tempting to consider the two regions' ambivalent status as both colonized and colonizing entities. Whatever the shortcomings of such an approach, it proceeds from the valid observations that the 19th century America as a cultural phenomenon had been treated with open disdain by European, and in particular British critics, and that numerous pro-South activists continue to perceive their region as the principal victim of the Yankee/federal/American empire in the 20th century.

The basic difficulty in posing the above problems stems from the fact that American cultural and political independence had been achieved in the pre-modern era, long before the Third World countries began to throw off the yoke of European dominance, and therefore scholars have usually argued it should not be treated as a (post)colonial event. In addition, authors

³ H. A. Baker Jr. and D. D. Nelson, *Violence, the Body and The South*. In *American Literature*, vol. 73, no 2, June 2001, p. 234.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 233.

such as Jorge Klor de Alva question the applicability of postcolonialism and/or decolonization to the histories of both South and North America, claiming that, separation and civil wars notwithstanding, the states of the Americas "separated themselves politically and economically, but not culturally or socially, from their metropolises" and thus do not deserve to be called postcolonial.⁵ Furthermore, there has been no unanimous agreement as to the degree of the South's distinctiveness and the region's right to feel oppressed when its welfare, political philosophy, and social hierarchies were based on slavery. From this perspective, the South's pretences of being exploited might be perceived as an act of insolent appropriation. For instance, the pro-South activists use the term "internal colonialism" trying to define the oppression from the federal government, although the above term has traditionally been applied to the exploitation of Native Americans by U.S. corporations. Nevertheless, a closer analysis of the literary/cultural relations between the South and the North lends support to the assumption that postcolonialism might constitute a meaningful category of analysis if it is applied to the dominant pro-national sensibility in the 19th century America.

The feasibility of a colonial/postcolonial approach for the study of nineteenth-century U.S. texts has been considered by Lawrence Buell who in "American Literary Emergence as a Postcolonial Phenomenon" suggests that early American writers deserve to be treated as postcolonial and remarks, in a tone of complaint, that "[s]ome formidable barriers inhibit Americanists from analogizing between this country's literary emergence and even that of Canada or Australia, let alone West India or West Africa."⁶ Buell's thesis is promising insofar as it focuses on the cultural dimension of America's independence and isolates it from the political and economic discourse of the 19th century American colonies:

To transpose from the colonial to the postcolonial stage of the first half of the American nineteenth century, we need only substitute cultural authority for political/military authority as the object of resistance. Although the 13 American colonies never experienced anything like the political/military domination colonial India did, the extent of cultural colonization by the mother country, from epistemology or aesthetics to dietetics, was on the whole much more comprehensive – and partly because of the selfsame comparative benignity of the imperial regime.⁷

Suggestive as this observation was, it nevertheless provoked numerous objections on the part of those scholars who examined the potential validity

⁵ J. J. Klor de Alva, *The Postcolonization of the (Latin) American Experience: A Reconsideration of 'Colonialism,' 'Postcolonialism,' and 'Mestizaje.'* In *After Colonialism. Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements.* Ed. Gyan Prakash. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995, p. 247.

⁶ L. Buell, *American Literary Emergence as a Postcolonial Phenomenon.* In *American Literature, American Culture.* Ed. Gordon Hutner. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 592.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 595.

of postcolonial theory for the study of United States culture and history. It was precisely the fact that Buell ignored America's political/colonial/imperial aspirations in his analysis of the country's cultural sensibility that earned him a reputation of a hypocritical scholar who is treading "difficult ground, both historically and morally."⁸ Amy Kaplan's objections are perhaps most far-reaching as far as Buell's theoretical framework is concerned. Having analyzed the somewhat downplayed or forgotten story of the American empire, she puts forward the accusation that Buell "not only overlooks the history of American imperialism, but in a sense colonizes postcolonial theory by implicitly positing the United States as the original postcolonial nation."⁹

There is perhaps some logic in claiming that the fashioning of U.S. culture was to a certain degree based on freeing from England's cultural dominance and, more generally, on the wish to do away with its "protracted servility to the European."¹⁰ Undoubtedly, the very possibility and identity of American literature had been undermined throughout the 19th century. As late as 1898 Henry Pancoast reduced American literature to "simply the... American branch of English literature set by colonization in fresh earth. ...Our true place in literary history is as one of the literatures of this greater England."¹¹ However, Peter Hulme's view seems more palatable and/or sobering: America of the early period wanted independence from England and promoted a new non-European mode of existence, but in its wish for new markets and imperial expansion was not much different from the old Continent, so it was "postcolonial and colonizing at the same time."¹² In addition, a postcolonial approach to the United States runs the risk of producing yet another uncritical version of American exceptionalism.

In "America's Troubled Postcoloniality: Some reflections from Abroad," Gesa Mackenthun exposes yet another weakness in Buell's thesis by stating that his comparison of the U.S. literature with the literature of recently decolonized countries "symptomatically effaces the historical importance of Africa and African people in the constitution of early American society, culture, and literature."¹³ Mackenthun's essay aptly summarizes the debate concerning the uncertain status of the United States of America as a postcolonial country, and places emphasis on the conspicuous absence of postcolonial ideas from American Studies and lack of agreement as to whether they

⁸ G. Mackenthun, *America's Troubled Postcoloniality: Some reflections from Abroad*. In *Discourse*, 22.3, Fall 2000, p. 35.

⁹ A. Kaplan, *New Perspectives on U.S. Culture and Imperialism*. In *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, eds. Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993, p. 21.

¹⁰ W. G. Simms, *Views and Reviews In American Literature History And Fiction*. Ed. C. Hugh Holman. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1962. p. 10.

¹¹ L. Levine, *The Opening of the American Mind. Canons, Culture, and History*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996, p. 82.

¹² P. Hulme, *Including America*. In *Ariel* 26.1 (1995): 117-123, p. 122.

¹³ Mackenthun, p. 35.

should be included at all. Interestingly enough, while Mackenthun notices few scholars are ready to grant the U.S. a status of a postcolonial country, he also complains about the vague and all-encompassing terminologies of the modern era, which fail to capture truly specific traits of the phenomenon of postcolonialism. Mackenthun's suggestions are intended to overcome the limitations and exaggerations of the hitherto cherished approaches:

It is important, therefore, to postulate a fundamental difference between the *bilateral* colonial, and later "postcolonial," relationship between the English mother country and its American colonists, who were themselves the local outposts of Britain's imperial policy, and the *multilateral or transnational* colonial relationship between the Anglo-Saxon colonists (later American nationalists) and African and American indigenous groups who were subjected to a combination of violent dispossession and forced labor justified with "scientific" theories of white supremacy and historical determinism. The example of the United States, and of other American countries, demonstrates the need to regard colonialism in systemic terms rather than just bilateral ones.¹⁴

For Mackenthun the postcolonial approach is useful insofar as it questions the traditional boundaries and essentialist dogmas in the field of the American Studies, and encourages interpreting history in more international contexts:

An appreciation of the positive effect of taking a postcolonial perspective on the history of the United States – its potential to transcend the domestic and continental navel gazing of past decades – ought to be distinguished from historically unfounded claims that the United States was a post-colonial country.¹⁵

Mackenthun's perspective concentrates solely on the flaws of the postcolonial approach towards America. One is almost left with the suspicion that the bilateral terms of colonialism do not deserve such a categorical opposition. In fact, a triangular Britain-America-South relationship seems to be best suited for any consideration of the 19th century battles for cultural autonomy in the U.S. Such an approach would facilitate an understanding of the South's complex status and the multitude of roles it has performed for the rest of the country. (Parenthetically, it seems worth remarking that this complexity has been mirroring the position and status of the U.S. – highly volatile, susceptible to ideological distortions and critical fashions.) It is simply that Buell's thesis is armed with precise tools of analysis which do not let the reader altogether discard the postcolonial approach. In fact the question touched upon by Lawrence Buell, whether imagining America "as a postcolonial rather than proto-imperial power"¹⁶ is not a hypocritical act, might be paraphrased so as to include the South and the American empire.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 36.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 37.

¹⁶ Buell, p. 592.

Above all, it should be remarked that the American South has always expressed dissatisfaction with being "colonized" by the federal U.S. "majority" and proudly admitted close cultural ties with Britain. John Crowe Ransom once observed that the Southern culture had been modeled on the European, or to be exact, English pattern, which somehow strengthened its difference: "there is in the South even today an Anglophile sentiment quite anomalous in the American scene."¹⁷ On the other hand, the U.S. also felt colonized and taken advantage of, and dependent on... Great Britain. At the risk of simplification one might suggest that having one and the same patron produced different outcomes on the part of the South and the non-South. In other words, what the U.S. tried to shake off, was not treated as hostile by the South.

What seems even more convincing and useful in analyzing the situation of the American South is the idea quoted by Buell that those ruled resist the rulers "within the psychological limits set by the latter."¹⁸ Such a form of resistance often took place in the case of the pro-South activists and men of letters. In this connection, a fragment of an 1853 appeal to embrace the Southern cause is well worth quoting:

Whenever any one people, in the progress of their career, shall become different from all others in essential, moral, and physical respects – when they shall arrive at such form, outline, and material, as to possess for themselves a figure of individuality, and attain a sufficient degree of civilization for the purpose of self-government ...they then either are, or should be – and perforce, will be – a separate political community.¹⁹

The above fragment's obvious similarity to the content and rhetoric devices of the Declaration of Independence invites a paradoxical conclusion. By referring to the famous historical document the author emphasizes the political necessity and rightness of the separation desired by the South, but the fact that the appeal is patterned on an American document somehow confirms the region's intellectual inferiority and/or lack of truly original modes of expression.

To continue with Buell's line of reasoning, he observed:

During what is now called our literary renaissance, America remained for many foreign commentators (especially the British), albeit diminishingly, the unvoiced "other" – with the predictable connotations of exoticism, barbarism, and unstructuredness.²⁰

As a civilization in the making, the South was subjected to a similar assessment, but this time it was the American North which exacted punishing statements and produced arrogant generalizations concerning supposedly

¹⁷ J. C. Ransom, *Reconstructed But Unregenerate*. In *I'll Take My Stand. The South and the Agrarian Tradition*. New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1962, p. 3, 14.

¹⁸ Buell: p. 592.

¹⁹ J. McCardell, *The Idea of a Southern Nation. Southern Nationalists and Southern Nationalism, 1830-1860*. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979, p. 171-2.

²⁰ Buell, p. 596.

typical Southern traits. To strengthen the notion of North America's postcolonial status, Buell gives Tocqueville as an example; his shrewdness, he says, "should not blind us to the arrogance of this rhetoric of the imperial generalization."²¹ And the South, similarly to America, on the one hand delights in its real or imaginary otherness, but on the other hand it feels its duty to respond to criticisms and shows hypersensitive alertness to non-Southern opinion. John McCardell's study recapitulates the increasing inferiority complex in the land of Dixie in the mid-nineteenth century:

Growing ever more conscious of the South's minority status, literary men revealed their alienation from national literary advancement. A new sensitivity to every suggestion of Southern inferiority pervaded the writings of many Southerners. "Twenty years ago it was scornfully asked in England, 'who reads an American book?'" stated the *Southern Literary Messenger*. "This same question is doubtless now asked in the North concerning Virginia."²²

There are more similarities between America and the South as far as Buell's "marks of postcolonialism" are concerned. "[T]he semi-Americanization of the English language" mentioned by Buell²³ brings inevitable associations with the South's attempts to make its language culturally distinct from the Yankee standard. The South's peculiar idioms, lexical units and pronunciation are not a source of embarrassment but a positive value, yet another sign of resistance. The English language, seemingly a factor preventing the colonies from severing the ties with England, eventually turns out to be a unifying force which secures yet another means of achieving distinctiveness. James M. Cox's chapter in *Columbia Literary History of the United States* provides an intriguing reminder of the pre-Civil War circumstances concerning the literary uses of language:

The difficult issue facing the American writer was the effort to make a national literature for a country without a native language. . . . If American writers were burdened with the act of writing in English, their glory was both their wish and their determination to be *American*. America *was* their region, and however many dialects existed within the nation, from the perspective of England – an outside perspective – all writers were American.

From an inside perspective, there was a great difference. The regions, or sections, within a country "regional" in its language but national in its identity, still had the revolutionary possibility of themselves being nations.²⁴

The sensitivity about the variety of language that "properly" reflects a given region's heritage and cultural aspirations, proves to be a continuous

²¹ Ibidem, p. 597.

²² McCardell, p. 155.

²³ Buell, p. 602.

²⁴ J. M. Cox, *Regionalism: A Diminished Thing*. In *Columbia Literary History of the United States*. Edited by Emory Elliott et al. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988, p. 762-3.

phenomenon in the 21st century South. Characteristically, the pro-South activists from The Tennessee League of the South proudly give the Webster's old dictionary as the only truthful and historically justified source of the language in which their website has been created. In the manifesto entitled "Why does DixieNet employ such peculiar spelling conventions?" the following explanation is offered:

The unusual spellings you see on DixieNet are not typographical errors. For cultural distinctiveness the League of the South utilises traditional Southern orthography based on the British Oxford's standard rather than the familiar, but Yankee inspired, Webster's orthography.²⁵

This answer is expanded and further ideologized by Dr James Everett Kibler, Jr, who in his "Verbal Independence" remarks:

Our Southern spelling in these is based largely (but not exclusively) upon British orthography—that orthography predating Noah Webster's assault on diversity that culminated in his famous conformist dictionary. (Noah Webster was the consummate Yankee codifier and the chief centraliser of the language.)²⁶

The homepage of the League of the South, one of the most active and anti-Yankee organizations, openly attacks the American spelling conventions imposed on all regions of the United States:

For cultural distinctiveness the LS eschews the use of Webster's so-called "American" English orthography which actually is nothing more than a bastardisation of the proper and correct English language by New England busybodies.²⁷

To which it should be added that in the antebellum era the Southern writer had the duty of assisting in the political machinery of independence. More exactly, his/her work was to perpetuate the distinct image of the region. Such a situation bears yet another resemblance to one of Buell's traits of postcolonialism, namely "[t]he expectation that artists be responsible agents for achieving national liberation."²⁸

Undoubtedly, the Southern search for distinctiveness in numerous ways parallels and/or imitates the general self-reflective mood which has characterized the American studies. The tools of this self-analysis have been constantly borrowed from the "federal Big Brother," although its results have not necessarily been in accordance with the general "Yankee" mood. Robert Penn Warren once remarked that obsession with the South was "the very

²⁵ The Tennessee League of the South. *Why does DixieNet employ such peculiar spelling conventions?* <http://www.freetennessee.org/index.htm>: 1 p.

²⁶ J. E. Kibler, Jr. *Verbal Independence*. <http://www.dixienet.org/spatriot/vol4no4/verball.htm>: 1 p.

²⁷ League of the South 2. <http://www.dixienet.org/ls-homepg/orthography.html>: 1 p.

²⁸ Buell, p. 604.

ritual of being American."²⁹ Ironically, however, the South, "a new nation insisting on its own manifest destiny,"³⁰ has constructed its 20th century identity mainly in opposition to the United States as a political as well as cultural concept.

Philip Fisher describes all conflicts related to race, gender, ethnicity and class as "civil wars" over representation.³¹ This metaphor produces associations with the spilling of blood of compatriots and an ultimate victory of the dominant party. Less obviously, it also admits the possibility that none of the parties involved should unconditionally justify their doings, and constitutes a powerful reminder that even if the Southern predicament has been hitherto associated with the traditionally dominant, exclusionary centers of power and knowledge which have shaped the image of the United States, no unanimous agreement has been reached as to whether regionalism is just one more oppressive myth or an inevitable reflection of strivings for cultural/political independence. To accept the former would mean an easy adjustment to the post-structural theory of holistic master narratives, to approve of the latter would mean ignoring the gloomy aspects of the South's history, or even open partisanship to the region's "cause". It is fair to wonder whether the currently prevalent theories of the Southern (non-)identity do justice to the region's past and present accomplishments. At the risk of exaggeration one might state that the case of the American South to a certain extent makes it impossible to maintain any pretense of unbiased representation on the part of the Southern studies scholars and encourages a political/ideological heteroglossia, even if in the final analysis taking sides will turn out to be inevitable.

²⁹ M. Kreyling, *THE SOUTH 'R' US*. In *Mississippi Quarterly*, vol. 51, issue 4, Fall 1998, p. 712.

³⁰ J. V. Ridgely, *19th Century Southern Literature*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1980, p. 18.

³¹ P. Fisher, *The New American Studies: Essays from Representations*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991, p. xxii.