INTRODUCTION

Old/New/Post/Real/Global/No South
Paradigms and Scales

MARTYN BONE

This book explores how an eclectic range of narratives and images of the American South have been created and consumed—indeed, often created for consumption. However, the contributors also seek to move beyond both traditional southernist and more recent postmodernist understandings of how, when, where, and why the American South has been created and consumed. The thirteen essays in this volume reorient our attention to the ways in which ideas and stories about “the South” and “southernness” have social and material effects that register on various local, regional, national, and transnational scales.

As an academic field in which even constituent disciplines like history and literary studies have often remained separate, U.S. southern studies traditionally has cohered around and returned to certain well-worn themes like “southern distinctiveness.” This has involved recurring debates over whether said distinctiveness (usually assumed to have existed, even if its sources are contested) has survived or has succumbed to social and economic forces (usually perceived to be external and pernicious). This seemingly endless and often anxious discourse around distinctiveness—a prime example of what Scott Romine sees as southern studies’ “overdeveloped eschatological sense”—has also permeated popular media: in 2013 journalist Tracy Thompson lamented that the South “has been
urbanized, suburbanized, strip-malled, and land-formed to a point that at times I hardly recognize it anymore.” Conversely, southern partisans continue to insist on the endurance of regional difference: when Apple’s iPhone voice recognition software struggles with the dialect and accent of “us Southerners,” such corporate malfeasance serves to validate the sub-cultural (or neonational) persistence of “a distinct people with our own culture.”

Such contemporary responses to the suburbanization, modernization, or homogenization of Dixie are fairly consistent with those narratives of decline and endurance, invasion and resistance, that have shaped discussions of southern identity for decades. Commentators on the right and left alike have long complained that “industrialism,” “Americanism,” and the postmodern “cultural logic of late capitalism” have rendered the region less and less real, more and more indistinct and simulated. For decades, both conservative and liberal elegies for the loss—as well as paens to the survival—of a putatively authentic “southern way of life” have carried the whiff of warmed-over outtakes from the Nashville Agrarians’ manifesto I’ll Take My Stand (1930). If this testifies to the legacy of the conservative neo-Agrarian ideology that so thoroughly informed the institutionalization of southern literary studies in the 1950s, it is also now fully four decades since the appearance of the most prominent liberal version of the end-of-southern-distinctiveness jeremiad: John Egerton’s The Americanization of Dixie (1972), which worried out loud and at length that “the South is just about over as a separate and distinct place,” due to “an obsession with growth and acquisition and consumption” combined with “a steady erosion of the sense of place, of community.”

Since the 1970s, however, and especially in the early twenty-first century, scholars have emphasized that “the South” is a discursive, ideological, or commercial construct rather than a material, geographical site (Egerton’s “separate and distinct place”). In their introduction to South to a New Place (2002), Suzanne Jones and Sharon Monteith remark that the South’s “mythic properties have traditionally exceeded its realities.” Tara McPherson’s Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South (2003) opens by asserting, “The South today is as much a fiction, a story we tell and are told, as it is a fixed geographic space below the Mason-Dixon line.” Jennifer Greeson states on the first page of Our South: Geographic Fantasy and the Rise of National Literature (2010), “This South that we hold collectively in our minds is not—could not possibly
be—a fixed or real place . . . it is a term of the imagination, a site of national fantasy.” Anthony Stanonis, in his introduction to *Dixie Emporium: Tourism, Foodways, and Consumer Culture in the American South* (2008), remarks, “As mass-produced goods and travelers unfamiliar with local customs increasingly penetrated the region beginning in the antebellum period, the South became as much an evolving set of images as an actual place.”4

Though this more recent emphasis on the imagined South has offered a way around decline-and-death narratives about the tragic erasure or heroic endurance of southern distinctiveness, it has itself become rather rote, congealing into a kind of postmodern-constructionist consensus. One aim of the present volume, then, is to explore more nuanced ways of understanding the region as both a circulating discourse and a social, material locus—in Romine’s terms, as both “the real South” and “the South-under-no-description”—at conceptual and geographical scales ranging from the local to global.5

Around half of the chapters in *Creating and Consuming the American South* focus partly or wholly on the twenty-first century, and not without reason. If *The Americanization of Dixie* is now over forty years old, it is also more than a decade since Jon Smith interrogated and inverted Egerton’s Americanization thesis by suggesting that “as the South becomes more ‘Americanized’—as identity becomes more and more structured as a lack to be filled by consumption—the paradoxical result may be the increasing commodity-fetishization of southernness itself.” Both Smith in 2002 and historian James Cobb in 2005 saw this trend expressed in the promotion by southernness.com of a perfume that supposedly bottled “the celebrated Southern ‘sense of place.”6 Almost a decade later, it is one more irony of southern cultural history that Romine’s chapter in the present volume identifies a similar process and result in the fetishization of “southern foodways” by the Southern Foodways Alliance, a semi-academic organization cofounded by Egerton. Yet in the contemporary era of economic globalization, and especially after the global financial crisis that began in 2007, scholarly musings on a brand of perfume or form of foodway can themselves seem kitschy or quaint (especially when, as Smith remarks in his chapter for this volume, that perfume is no longer produced). While for some southern(ist) partisans globalization simply supersedes Americanization as the latest external leviathan threatening Dixie, the perceived danger may also intensify emotional and economic investment in “south-
ernness” through what Smith identifies as a combined narrative- and commodity-fetishism. Cobb observes further contradictions and ironies arising from the Globalization of Dixie: “Paradoxically enough, by threatening to take our national, regional, or ethnic identities away from us, the global economy first stimulates our desire to preserve them, and then through a combination of commodification and clever marketing, it proceeds to sell them back to us.” But there is another twist, for as Smith stresses in *Finding Purple America* (2013), southernness is not simply being commodified and sold by “them” to “us.” In the twenty-first-century arena of “Southern civic brand identities,” where “the civic brand Dixie and its logo the Confederate battle flag” compete with Birmingham’s attempt to “alter its brand image” on the back of a native son’s *American Idol* victory, the creation and consumption of “the South” is a process in which “we Southerners”—including academic southernists—are active participants.

But as Stanonis reminds us, the creation, commodification, and consumption of the South as “an evolving set of images” is nothing new either: like ideas of southern distinctiveness, such images date back to at least the antebellum period. For this and other reasons, *Creating and Consuming the American South* can hardly confine itself to the twenty-first century. Even when focused on the recent past, many of the chapters also range back through the history of the region in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and attend to the uncanny recurrence of images and narratives of older Souths—from the plantation and the Lost Cause to “folk” cultures and the civil rights movement.

It is worth adumbrating some of the ways in which “the idea of the American South” has always been subject to invention and reinvention by, among other things, political ideologies and market forces. Greeson insists that narratives of “our South” as the United States’ “internal other” began with the birth of the nation during the War of Independence, and that these northern and national narratives of the “Plantation South” and the “Slave South” intensified during the early nineteenth century. James Peacock suggests that below the Mason-Dixon line (white) southern self-fashioning took on fuller form after 1830: following two centuries in which “the South was a node in a network stretching from Europe through the Caribbean . . . around 1830 the South as a region was invented, as people migrated inland and formed a regional identity that turned inward, in opposition to the nation.” Both politicians like James Henry Hammond
and novelists like William Gilmore Simms contributed to this process of inventing “the South,” culminating in what Drew Gilpin Faust calls “the creation of Confederate nationalism.”¹³

Daniel Aaron has observed that once the Union army defeated the Confederate army, “[t]he ideal of the Old South—order, beauty, freedom—remained.”¹⁴ As I have noted elsewhere, this detachment of an idealized South from the defeated nation-state proved rather convenient to authors like Thomas Nelson Page, who produced romantic neo-Con federate narratives that elided the CSA’s true lost cause: the maintenance of racial slavery.¹⁵ Such narratives were wildly popular, and not only in the South: by 1888 they were so prevalent nationwide that war veteran and novelist Albion Tourgée observed in exasperation, “Our literature has become not only Southern in type, but distinctly Confederate in sympathy.”¹⁶ As Ted Ownby notes, such “Southern” literature was successful because “white northerners literally bought into the romance of reunion [with white southerners] at the expense of any concern for the injustices African Americans faced.”¹⁷ David Blight emphasizes that the creation and consumption of this romantic Old South often had an economic as well as ideological base: “Sectional reconciliation was . . . staged in part as a means of cementing commercial ties between Northern money and Southern economic development.” As part of the “southern mythmaking” process that Paul Gaston termed the “New South Creed,” boosters like Henry Grady and plantation fiction authors like Page and Joel Chandler Harris advocated southern economic progress empowered by northern capital even while extolling a deeply nostalgic vision of the Old South that appealed to, and extracted profit from, a receptive national audience anxious about the dislocating dimensions of modern, urban, industrial capitalism.¹⁸

In the late nineteenth century, the burgeoning southern tourist industry began to capitalize on northerners’ attraction to the increasingly accessible (by railroad) southern states: Civil War battlegrounds were marketed as historic sites; east Florida towns such as Saint Augustine and Palm Beach promoted themselves to northerners as winter retreats; and numerous southern cities organized expositions.¹⁹ Images of the South as simultaneously nostalgic, exotic, and authentic permeated other nascent forms of popular culture: as Karen Cox notes in her analysis of early-twentieth-century sheet music (the MP3 file of its time), “‘Dixie’ was not simply a reference to a region: it was a brand purposefully linked to the