Being and Southernness| The contemporary Southern writer's dilemma

Betsy Herring

The University of Montana

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Herring, Betsy, "Being and Southernness| The contemporary Southern writer's dilemma" (1999). Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers. 1659. https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/1659

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.
Permission is granted by the author to reproduce this material in its entirety, provided that this material is used for scholarly purposes and is properly cited in published works and reports.

**Please check "Yes" or "No" and provide signature**

Yes, I grant permission [X]

No, I do not grant permission

Author’s Signature: Betsy Herring

Date: 1/19/2000

Any copying for commercial purposes or financial gain may be undertaken only with the author’s explicit consent.
Being and Southernness
The Contemporary Southern Writer's Dilemma

By
Betsy Herring

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
The University of Montana
1999

Approved by:

[Signatures]
Chairman, Board of Examiners
Dean, Graduate School

Date: 1-20-2000
Josephine Humphreys has two Southern histories to contend with: the more than four hundred year series of events which actually occurred from first English settlement in Virginia to the publication of her last novel, and the ensuing documentation of those events. For any contemporary writer contending with these two histories, a problem arising out of the postmodern condition is telling the difference between the two. The complex relation between them compels Humphreys and many of her contemporaries to write in order to document and preserve their places and to write in order to overcome the already-documented history. Examples of such documented history to be overcome are the lists of characteristics that supposedly define Southern literature as Southern. I explore how Humphreys modifies and subverts characteristics on the critical lists supplied by a group of scholars widely referred to as the Rubin generation, thereby creating a new list that opens more space in which the Southerner actually exists. The Rubin generation was given its name by Lewis P. Simpson in “The State of Southern Literary Scholarship” (1987), and it includes Louis D. Rubin, Jr., and the five associate editors—including Simpson—with whom Rubin worked on the comprehensive study of Southern literary history entitled The History of Southern Literature (1985). Simpson says, “The History of Southern Literature is dominated editorially by Rubin and five senior associates—in other words, by what I believe, by virtue of his long centrality in southern literary studies, may be called the ‘Rubin generation’” (250). With the italics and capital letters of the title removed, the previous sentence takes on an ironically different meaning: The history of Southern literature is dominated editorially by Rubin and five senior associates. It is the meaning in this altered sentence that has spurred
contemporary Southern writers to work to overcome the Rubin generation’s editorial domination.

Though I would not refer to myself as an avid fan of Josephine Humphreys’s novels, I do feel that they aptly demonstrate how the Rubin generation’s Southern literary study falls short in its examination of the Southern present. I view Humphreys’s adherence to and modification of any framework of Southernness—in the midst of postmodern doubt about what is Southern—as representative of Southern writers’ struggles against critics’ Southern nostalgia. Through my examination of *Dreams of Sleep*, *Rich in Love*, and *The Fireman’s Fair*, I explore how Humphreys’s treatment of place and past leads her readers to a broader understanding of the Southern present.

In order to understand what is meant by a “changing” South, I examine the ways it has changed and come to be called Old, New, or as critic Jack Butler says, New New. In his essay in *The History of Southern Literature*, Craig Werner writes that the Old South, approximately comprising the period between 1815-1840, is said to have at first been producing literature that “shared most of the basic concerns of that written in The North. [But] by 1840 the increasing divergence of economic, political, and social conditions had created a specifically Southern literature reflecting the distinctive concerns and attitudes that were to survive as constituting elements of Southern literature in later eras” (81). These differences from the literature of the North (at that time north of Maryland, up through New England) include,

A complex concern with slavery, distinctive Afro-American forms including slave narratives and a complex folk literature, and a romantic plantation tradition in fiction... [that] differed sharply from the philosophical romanticism of Northern writers in its emphasis on the mythic elements of history rather than the metaphysical dilemmas that fascinated the transcendentalists. (81)
In his essay entitled, "Henry W. Grady and the New South," Dewey Grantham says journalist Henry Grady differentiated the creed of the early New South from the Old South in three ways. First, the New South (approximately 1880-1950, but dates differ among texts) abandoned slavery and strove to become "diversified and industrialized." Second, the citizens of the New South were expected to depict race relations as harmonious. Third, the New South citizens were to confirm their defeat in the war and pledge loyalty to the Union (243). After admitting that qualities of later New South literature "might also be said to be rather characteristic of [the literature of] any rural people," Fred Hobson concludes, "the most notable southern writers of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s were far more conscious of place, family, community, religion and its social manifestations, and the power of the past in the present than were nonsouthern American writers" (4).

Jack Butler posits that New South writers have been pushing toward a New New South as a result of the modern imperative: don't repeat (35). He says modern (New New South) writers use four strategies:

- In one way or another, we seem to me to be conservators, updaters, deniers, and futurists. The conservators typically set their stories in the past, or they restrict the field of view sufficiently to minimize the effects of recent history. They aren't writing about the past as if they are still in it. The updaters move us visibly forward from the old recognizable patterns into newer generations, trying to suggest why we created the kind of New South we have, trying to show the almost genetic continuance of the tradition. The deniers are after something fundamental. Richard Ford is our great denier. He has been steadily purifying himself away from influences, toward a sort of dispassion. Futurists do not seem to be worried so much about monitoring social change in the new world as about making certain that the instrument of perception always stays bright and clean. They are modern because they create never-before-seen relations. (38-39)
Since the Old South gave way to the New South, which Butler says is giving way to the New New South, one would think that a change in society from which the literature comes would necessitate a rethinking of the old standards for the literature. But standards of the literature of the past remain a fixed ideal in the minds of the critics who characterized them, and who critique the literature of the present. The South is defined, evaluated and redefined by critics with lists.

In the wake of the South’s change from what critics call the New South to what they call the New New South, Southerners are finding themselves in a comparable situation to Michel Foucault’s nineteenth century human being: “The human being no longer has any history: or rather, since he speaks, works, and lives, he finds himself interwoven in his own being with histories that are neither subordinate to him nor homogeneous with him...the man who appears at the beginning of the nineteenth century is ‘dehistoricized’” (368-369). Foucault says each man is his own individual history; that is, he has historicity, which provides “a foundation for all other histories” (370). There is not one sweeping universal history to which all things belong. Rather, every person’s life is itself a recorder of its own history and is capable of picking out similarities between itself and preceding histories and calling these similarities “patterns,” though they still remain similar individual histories. Patterns can be difficult to perpetuate in a climate of change, as contemporary Southerner writers are showing.

For the contemporary Southerner living in a changing Southern environment, the idea of history limited to an individual life is an extremely important idea. The South’s history has included a multitude of ideas about what it means to be Southern. In each era of Southern history, similar ideas about Southern identity have come to represent the
Southern identity of that era simply because history tends toward “synchronological patternings within a historicity” (Foucault 370). Today, the pattern that seems most obvious is the recurring idea of the postmodern Southern condition, in which writers and critics are questioning the meanings of the words “South” and “Southern” on which stories are based. Some Southern writers and critics are not bothering to characterize themselves in terms of past Southern identities, but they are instead questioning how Southern identities, ontologies, and epistemes established themselves in light of, or despite, the fact that history is mediated and each person had a historicity uncommon to other persons.

Josephine Humphreys is especially demonstrative of individual historicity in the present. In each of her novels, there is a character who has a gift called “invision” which refers to an intense focus on things as they are here and now. Lucille Odom, Humphreys’s seventeen-year-old narrator of *Rich in Love* (1987), gave invision its name. Though that term is not used in her other two novels, the characters in them display their own invision. Humphreys is looking at the South now with this same invision. In her essay entitled, “A Disappearing Subject Called the South,” she states her fictional aim:

> Whenever story can locate itself in reality, it will draw on reality’s mystery and power, becoming that oddity of literary endeavor, true fiction. This geographical imperative exists because fiction has as its natural subject the real world and real man in it, and all the complications brought on by one clear fact: We are here. The writing of fiction must always involve both the we and the here. (215)

In her fictional process of characterizing the Southern present, spatially and temporally, Humphreys has determined that what is the most relevant Southern history, is the most recent historicity of her present day characters. Writers and critics reluctant to let go of what they call the New South are reluctant to recognize Humphreys’s fiction as worthy
since it does not resemble what they have determined to be worthy Southern literature.

But what is Southern?

Questions about the projected identity of Southern, and its effects on Southern authors, readers and critics have dominated Southernists’ work for the past two decades. In “The State of Southern Literary Scholarship,” Simpson says, “The problem is that nobody...has ever been able to define the South—not even to its precise geographical configuration, let alone its political, religious, and intellectual character. Has the South been--is the South today--a genuinely definable historical entity? If so, is it an empirical or a metaphysical entity? Or is it...a fiction?” (245-6). The idea of the South as a fiction leaves some Southerners bristling because they believe that old Southern fiction which was a representation of Southern reality has come to prescribe contemporary Southern fiction and contemporary Southern reality.

A writer and teacher of literature, Eve Shelnutt, describes herself as “from but not of the South,” and she has “sympathy for any writer bred of the South who may want to develop apart from a few or many or, indeed, all the common features of Southern writing” (7). Her sympathy is aroused by the list of prescribed characteristics expected to be common to Southern literature that Louis D. Rubin, Jr., restates in his 1988 essay, “Changing, Enduring, Forever Still the South”: “They are usually said to be a distinctive awareness of the Past, a firm identification with a Place, a preoccupation with one’s membership in a community, a storytelling bent (as compared with a concern for Problems), a strong sense of family and an unusually vivid consciousness of caste and class, especially involving race” (226). These characteristics are pertinent to many regional literatures worldwide where “story” is taking place and, therefore, too broad and
vague to provide meaning about Southern literature specifically. One wonders what is particularly Southern about them. Rubin acknowledges that “they are by no means unique to Southern writing, but their common presence, and their continuing mutual action upon each other, have been the hallmarks of the Southern novel” (228). Why have they remained the hallmarks of the Southern novel? Shelnutt believes that what Rubin and others before him have described as characteristics of Southern literature have come to prescribe the characteristics of Southern literature, and she expresses a wish for “editors, critics, and publishers to replace what one might suspect is a self-serving codification of Southern writing by encouragement to writers from the South whose work appears particularly non or un-'Southern'” (7-8).

Before exploring Rubin’s capital P’s—Past, Place, Problems—in relation to Humphreys’s literature, I want to explore Shelnutt’s observation that “it is not effective to experiment against a norm simply for the rebel-thrill of it” (8). Her point is that writing is often a difficult and rebellious task; writers have a difficult enough task in writing itself without taking on the added pressure of either confining themselves to the parameters of a norm, or trying to rebel against a norm for rebellion’s sake. She goes on to say that “a piece of writing outside an expected norm places increased demands on its publisher and readers, demands equal to those it no doubt placed on its writer” (8). I believe those demands can be necessary to refining a stifling cultural identity and a stifling cultural norm.

“Norm” coincides with Jean-Francois Lyotard’s notion of the authority, perhaps falsely “legitimated by consensus,” of literary critics who serve as definers of grand metanarratives and prescribers of cultures (72-73). Southern literature’s “norm” no
longer has credibility according to Lyotard’s argument that there is a crisis in the legitimizing function of narrative in general. Lyotard questions the way in which knowledge, obtained and transferred by the narratives of “experts,” accumulates and is taken as truth. A system of power has built up around the opinions of “experts” such as Rubin, Simpson, and Fred Hobson concerning what constitutes Southern literature worthy of the name, which is hegemonic in its invalidation of differing opinions. Elinor Ann Walker asks readers to remember a crucial fact about the list of characteristics of Southern fiction:

[T]he critics who actually established Southern literature as distinguishable from American literature, who gave name to its characteristics and created a discourse through which to communicate their observations--Louis D. Rubin, Jr., Lewis P. Simpson, C. Hugh Holman, and their predecessors, the Agrarians, Fugitives and New Critics---were male scholars steeped in the patriarchal traditions of the South. In other words, the very standards that were created to delineate a Southern literature were generated...out of a very specific perspective. (301)

This specific literary perspective would be fine if it were widely recognized as such, and did not therefore determine so much of what people think is Southern reality. Shelnutt, and no doubt many others, feel trapped in the Southern metanarrative and may feel that rebellion could be ineffective since it may simply reinforce the norm through opposition. The rebel-thrill is short lived since working against a norm still includes the norm. It is easy to foster sympathy for Shelnutt’s point of view; but even if rebel-thrill is the reason one would experiment against the Southern norm, the experimentation could still allow for the spreading of Lyotard’s notion of postmodern knowledge that “refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable” (73). Thus, it could be effective.
One must have had some grounding in the history of Southern change and reinterpretation to understand those capital P’s on Rubin’s list: Past, Place, Problems. Inescapably, that history includes the recent work of cultural historians. As Simpson says, “If a historian learns anything at all in...trying to find meaning in history, whatever kind of history he tries to cope with, it is that even as he strives to find meaning, he is a part of the meaning he seeks to disclose” (‘State’ 245). Seeking the South’s history and meaning has resulted in gauntlet-throwing among writers, critics, theorists, and cultural historians ever since Mencken’s original gauntlet, “The Sahara of the Bozart,” in which he states the Southern region is lacking in “literature” and “culture,” but abounding in “ignorance” and “stupidity” (491-494). If no one noticed the throwing of the gauntlet in Simpson’s original speech, “The State of Southern Literary Scholarship,” it was published in *The Southern Review* in 1988. Simpson revised it and published it again as the preface to *The Fable of the Southern Writer* (1994), which has provided ample opportunity for contemporary writers and theorists to respond. In it, he lists four “vital mandates” for Southernists. These include “a continued effort to recover the character of the white society of the Old South, a continued effort to recover the character of the Afro-American society in the Old South, a continued effort to recover the life and thought of the women of the South, black and white, and a continued effort to understand the meaning of the central event in American history, ...the Civil War” (250-251). Simpson then states that this pursuit is better suited to students of the South who are in departments of history than to those who are in literary departments.

Simpson has given Southerners another list by which they can understand themselves in terms of the Old South and then told them to leave to historians the work
necessary to enable them to understand. One thing New Historicists recognize is that “the historian’s cultural and historical position may not afford the best purview of a given set of events” (Murfin 229). Historians living in the present are also like Foucault’s dehistoricized man: they’re capable of recording their own individual historicities and noticing similarities between their recordings and previous recordings of Old South historicities, but they’re not capable of recording or “recovering” any sort of veritable Old South history. Changing times have brought changing tensions, and critic Jefferson Humphries recognizes that with respect to the past, “there is not one truth, but many, and all of them change while you look at them. The answer to ‘What happened?’ depends just as much on who and how and when you ask, as the answer to ‘What will happen?”’ (Introduction viii).

Of Southern literature, critics like Rubin, Simpson, and Humphries imply that the answer to “what is happening?” must have its origins in the Old South. Young Southernists are discouraged from writing about the present time with a recent past, one that isn’t consumed by The Past. When I write of the past—un-capitalized and un-italicized—I am referring to an interval of time prior to the present that is not dominated by, or consumed with, The Past. When I write of The Past, using italics and capital letters, I am referring to the representations of the Civil War, its aftermath, and the literature of the Southern Renaissance (1920-1950) which corresponds to it, as these pertain exclusively to what is considered a definitive identity of the South and to what is widely called the South’s “sense of loss.” Roughly, this includes both the Old and New South periods between 1860-1950. In literature and criticism, the South’s past is most widely recognized as time surrounding the Civil War and time surrounding the issue of
slavery and the responses to both of those. It was out of these that Southerners' tragic sense of loss and doom (widely called Faulknerian sense of loss) are said to originate. When Southern writers take on the theme of Southern history, they often confront what *The Past* means to the present. Most critics of Southern literature focus on this particular characteristic to first classify the literature as Southern, and second, to evaluate it as powerful, worthy, or innovative.

But, *The Past* was a product of its products. That is, we only know about *The Past* through its documentation in individual narratives. Jefferson Humphries says, "It is no longer possible to separate the literary from the historical" (Introduction xii). *The Past* refers to a representation of events produced by the people it housed. Any person in the present cannot know the set of events themselves. Furthermore, the events going on during the documentation process of *The Past* are inextricably a part of that documentation, and the people succeeding the documentors cannot know the events of *The Past*, nor the events of the documentation process. Foucault says, "Activities as peculiarly human as labour or language contain within themselves a historicity that could not be placed within the great narrative common to things and to men: Production has its modes of development ...which cannot be fitted over natural laws or reduced to the general progress of humanity" (367-368). The writing about *The Past* can only go so far in informing us about the past since the act of writing itself is situated in a specific context that we cannot know. Then what is the nature of the information that people in each succeeding age inherit about *The Past*? *The Past* is subject to the same unraveling as the signifiers of family, or South, or present.
Michael Kreyling’s assertion in “Fee, Fie, Faux Faulkner: Parody and Postmodernism in Southern Literature” is pertinent to a discussion about The Past and the past: “‘southern literature,’ ‘the southern writer,’ ‘the South’ are themselves just such ‘large-scale theoretical interpretations purportedly of universal application.’ By a kind of literary Heisenberg principle, it becomes impossible to talk about both southern and postmodern in the same discourse, since one cancels the other” (5). Kreyling means that the word “South” no longer carries a commonly understood meaning. What we have come to understand as the South has come from a system of representations about the South, which are themselves mediated. In his sentence quoted above, one could substitute the phrase The Past for the South, or substitute History for the South, and arrive at the same postmodern awareness of the phrases as ambiguous and indeterminate: What we have come to understand as The Past has come from a system of representations about The Past, which are themselves mediated.

Contemporary writers are responding in very different ways to the notion of The Past in the present. Some of these fictional responses limit the past to the range of the characters’ memories, and limit The Past to statues, monuments and plaques that honor it. Each of Josephine Humphreys’s novels is set in “present day” South Carolina, which seems to correspond to the years in which they were published--1984, 1987, and 1991. Self-consciousness about The Past, although not absent from the Southern present in her novels, does not dominate her Southern present. Why would Southerners want a past that is not dominated by The Past? Perhaps because there is so much life and culture before, during, and after the period from 1860-1950 which gets swallowed up by it, overlooked as a result of it, unexamined in the shadow of it, and forgotten because of it.
While Rubin, Simpson, Hobson and others recognize that Humphreys and some other Southern writers are moving away from self-consciousness about The Past, they force those writers to pay a price when they publish criticism about their fiction. Simpson and Hobson have published nearly identical sentiments about contemporary “under-fifty” Southern writers such as Josephine Humphreys, Bobbie Ann Mason, Lee Smith, Barry Hannah, Richard Ford, Jayne Anne Phillips, Clyde Edgerton, Jill McCorkle and many others. Simpson says that though skillful literary craftsmen born in the recent South use the Southern setting effectively, “what is missing, one senses, is the literary power generated by the imagination of a Faulkner, a Tate, a Warren…” (Fable xv). Hobson says about contemporary Southern fiction, “one sometimes finds–despite an abundance of literary skill, verisimilitude, charm…–a relative want of power that often had its origins in Warren’s, Styron’s and Faulkner’s southern self-consciousness” (10). “Power” refers to the problems associated with “self in society” according to Simpson, and “sweeping social change” according to Hobson, which, ironically, is exactly what the “under-fifty” writers about which they were speaking are taking on as subject matter. However, the “under-fifty” writers are writing from a totally different standpoint than past literary giants, because the nature of social changes has changed. In Josephine Humphreys’s South, “self in society” and “sweeping social change” are revealed through her modified versions of the characteristics on Rubin’s list. Holding up a literary mirror to here and now reveals that critics’ “distinctive awareness of the Past” has become the burden of a specific distinctive awareness of The Past; critics’ “firm identification with a Place” and “preoccupation with one’s membership in a community” have become a struggle to identify oneself in the communities of a constantly changing place; critics’
"storytelling bent (as compared with a concern for Problems)" has become a concern for
problems as compared with a storytelling bent; critics' "strong sense of family" has
become a strong sense of the defunct signifier family; critics' "unusually vivid
consciousness of caste and class, especially involving race" has become an unusually
vivid consciousness of the unusually vivid consciousness of caste, class and race. Later, I
explore each of these characteristics in Humphreys's works.

Simpson attributes the lack of power in contemporary Southern literature to
contemporary Southern writers' distance from The Civil War. He reasons that since
Southern writers born in the mid-twentieth-century have no personal links with the
memory of the Civil War, their memories are "insubstantial" in relation to those who
heard memories from a relative (Fable xvi). The implication is unmistakable that if
writers decide to write in a present, or from or about a past, that doesn't include self-
consciousness about The Past, then they lack power, innovativeness, or the literary skill
that gave rise to geniuses like Faulkner, for this particular kind of present or recent past
lacks all the "tension" necessary from which writers can produce great art.

In his introduction to Southern Literature and Literary Theory (1990), Jefferson
Humphries responded to this claim of Simpson's:

Lewis Simpson speaks for the Rubin generation in expressing the fear that
younger southern literati may lack the powerful sense of history that
came for our elders from temporal proximity to the Civil War, and that
was so essential for their strong sense of southern identity... While
they were looking back to the period between 1860 and 1865, we were
ourselves living through the most violent consequences of that war since
the experience of the war itself. That has given us a sense of tension with
southern culture, and within ourselves, which may even be more intense
and more vital, even fresher than that of our elders, who are often heard to
say that their "tensions," which define southernness for them, are growing
ever fainter, more ethereal, more purely intellectual--more historical than
literary. For literature can thrive only on an immediate, a present sense of
tension. And that is why I disagree with Lewis Simpson when he says that students of history, rather than those of literature, will carry the burden of southern identity for the next generation. (ix-xii, italics mine)

Jefferson Humphries is emphasizing the fact that due to living in The Civil War’s aftermath, which included Civil Rights, contemporary Southerners can be very familiar still with the tragic sense of loss with which post-Civil War Southerners were familiar. It is a compelling response to Simpson but, unfortunately, Humphries does not much concern himself with inquiries into Southerness that go beyond what Simpson has called “the central event in American history.” Humphries is dealing with tension on Simpson’s terms. Humphries does not address the fact that his own tensions arising from the aftermath of Civil Rights, which define Southern identity for him, may not necessarily define identity for Southerners today. I am again presented with the question, can contemporary Southern identity be defined? If so, what gives a contemporary Southerner identity?

Contemporary Southern writers like Josephine Humphreys are better at identifying what Southerners are not than what they are. Writers are not motivated to identify and represent Southerners as the persons who earned their descriptions through the old critical lists. In fact, Hobson asserts that they are not necessarily motivated to identify themselves in any way specifically Southern. Hobson finds contemporary Southern writers presenting lives close to qualifying as Donald Davidson’s “autochthonous ideal” of the 1920s. Hobson says that by the term “autochthonous ideal,” Davidson meant “a condition in which the writer was in a certain harmony with his social and cultural environment, was nearly unconscious of it as a ‘special’ environment...and thus was not motivated by any urge to interpret or explain” (80).
Early in his book, Hobson points out the distinction between writing in a postmodern world, which most contemporary Southern writers do, and writing postmodemly in the world, as Barth, Borges, and Calvino do. One of his criticisms of contemporary Southern writers is that they “accept rather than invent their world and are comparatively devoid of influence from past literary giants” (9). He implies that due to contemporary Southern writers’ acceptance of their world and their loss of influence from *The Past*, they lose the power associated with *The Past*. Perhaps assertions like Hobson’s are another reason Southerners and Southern writers wish for a history not consumed by *The Past*.

Humphreys’s “distinctive awareness of the Past” in her fiction is a step in the changing direction of documented Southern history. One thing that makes her awareness distinctive is who she privileges with the telling of history, and how far back that history reaches. In her novels, African Americans, Caucasians, females, males, young and old all have their say.

*Rich in Love* is saturated with the Foucauldean idea of individual historicity. Lucille Odom’s personal quest to understand her mother’s departure forces her to ironically rethink her own history: “I also felt strongly that history was a category comprising not only famous men of bygone eras, but me, yesterday. Wasn’t I as mysterious as John C. Calhoun, and my own history worth investigating?” (47). Textbook history is the farthest thing from Lucille Odom’s mind. When referring to a textbook citation on John C. Calhoun, Humphreys stops Lucille’s quote short with “...blah, blah, blah. I knew what [Calhoun’s theory of nullification] was about. As a red herring, it was of some mild interest to me, showing how men can dress greed as philosophy. But of consuming interest to me was the statue of John C. himself in the
city” (46). Lucille’s interest in the statue stems from her awareness that it represents something from which she feels completely disconnected, namely *The Past*. The inclusion of the statue is important in demonstrating how far back history goes for Lucille. It is not the man or his deeds which interest Lucille, but the sixty-foot representation of the man in her city. Situated here and now, this statue is as real as John C. Calhoun can be for Lucille. Her life, her own personal history, includes not the man, but the statue.

It is not probable that a teenager today, Caucasian or African American, will carry anything other than mild curiosity about the actions of John C. Calhoun when he is only as real as his representation in stone, or words on a page. Southerners’ Foucauldian disconnection from *The Past*—feeling neither subordinate to, nor homogeneous with, previous histories—is a complex phenomenon in contemporary Southern experience and Humphreys’s representation of it is a modification of Rubin’s “distinctive awareness of the Past.” That characteristic has become a burden to Southerners who wish to move away from a specific distinctive awareness of *The Past*. This moving away from *The Past* raises the concern that Southerners may be simply trying to shirk the bad parts of their history. Perhaps some are, but what Josephine Humphreys demonstrates is that some Southerners are trying to shirk the bad representations of the bad parts of their history, not the history itself.

Lucille picks up the statue theme again later in the novel: “In old cities there are always statues. Charleston had John C. Calhoun, Henry Timrod (Poet of the Confederacy), and a toga-clad woman who was meant to be Confederate Motherhood, sending her naked son into battle with the Yankees. But my favorite was Osceola, the
Seminole chief” (70). As with the statue of Calhoun, the statue of Osceola is what is relevant to Lucille, not his history. Although she is aware, as we discover, of the representations of his history, it is her idea of the statue as a representation of the ideal man that is most important: “Bees lived in him. They appeared to get in through a hole in his neck, which made me wonder if he was hollow. And if hollow, was he filled with honey?...I had grown up under his watch, and he had come to be a landmark and something of a hero to me, my idea of what a man should be. A warrior, secretly filled with sweetness” (70).

Humphreys’s fictional description of Osceola’s portrait is eerily similar to her description of a photograph of her grandmother, Neta. “[Osceola] knew something was afoot, you can tell from the portrait. The eyes have the gentle serenity of a man who sees fools and traitors all around him” (71). When describing the photograph of her grandmother in her essay, “My Real Invisible Self,” she says, “I can see in the remarkable eyes and mouth the bad years coming, even though the picture was taken long before her trouble actually erupted...Anyone can see it in the picture, but perhaps it wasn’t visible in real life” (6). Humphreys asserts that those who lived in the past were not blind to the bad things that were going to happen. The portrait, the photograph, the essay, and the novel are representative of how literary texts, non-literary texts and history are situated in an unbroken chain of reference to one another. But Humphreys questions the way in which representations of history come to light, or do not.

Humphreys uses Osceola to represent something other than Lucille Odom’s ideal man. To Lucille, Osceola also represents the left-out, or controlled parts of documented history. She looked up a grisly old legend about Osceola that shed some light on the
suspicious circumstances of his death in Charleston: “You won’t find the whole Osceola story in the history books, of course. I discovered these facts in the South Carolina Room at the library, where I worked on Friday afternoons. The room was kept locked...and I think I know the real reason they locked it. There was a lot of history in there that they didn’t want to let out” (71). This passage emphasizes the fact that Humphreys is not blind to the representations of the histories of bad things that happened in the South, nor are her characters. The statues, monuments, plaques, and locked-up documentations of history stand as representations of The Past so that it will not be forgotten.

But if documentations of The Past are locked up, how can they ever be known? In this passage Humphreys is also demonstrating how certain parts of history are being “forgotten” before they are ever really known, which raises a series of pertinent questions: Will an intense focus on the historicity of now keep history slanted in favor of those who wish to forget the bad parts of it, and those who will keep parts of it locked up in order to keep it locked in The Past? If all of documented history could be “unlocked,” would there then be an accurate representation of history? Not according to Linda Hutcheon’s argument that all historical documentations are mediated “texts.” “In arguing that history does not exist except as text, it does not stupidly and ‘gleefully’ deny that the past existed, but only that its accessibility to us now is entirely conditioned by textuality. We cannot know the past except through its texts: its documents, its evidence, even its eye-witness accounts are texts” (Hutcheon 256). The unlocked documentations would be subject to the same postmodern unraveling as the ones that have never been locked up. As long as whoever is doing the intense focusing on the historicity of now remains cognizant of epistemological doubt about representations of history, then history cannot
be perpetually slanted in favor of those who wish to keep parts of it hidden. The fact that there are and were such representations of history which remain unknown is enough to keep persons from relying on the representations we do have as a true, whole account of history. Humphreys not only remains cognizant of epistemological doubt, in *Rich in Love* she focuses on it.

A tension that drives Humphreys to produce her art can be said to be the tension that arises when one examines Southern history with what Linda Hutcheon calls the "ironic rethinking of history" (245). By this, Hutcheon means an examination of the ways in which we have come to know history, or how history has been revealed to us. The Rubin generation’s *History of Southern Literature* is an example of one way in which history has been “revealed” to us, and Rubin’s list of Southern literary characteristics is another. Humphreys’s novels are a kind of postmodern ironic response to those revelations. Borrowing Hutcheon’s descriptive phrases about the postmodern rethinking of history, Humphreys’s novels are “critical reworkings” of Rubin’s characteristics, and not a “nostalgic return” to the history which gave rise to them (245).

Humphreys never comes closer to mirroring Hutcheon’s commentary on the postmodern ironic rethinking of history than she does when she writes of Lucille Odom learning the crucial facts about her own origin in *Rich In Love*. When Lucille’s mother, Helen Odom, learned of her second pregnancy, she opted for an abortion. She took her eight-year-old daughter, Rae, with her, explaining that “she was pregnant and was going to get the egg vacuumed out” (49). It is Rae who tells Lucille that she was originally a twin, but the vacuum sucked out the other egg and left Lucille inside her mother, who
decided to keep Lucille after the discovery. Lucille comes to terms with that news fairly well:

No wonder my mother seemed aloof. And yet, I wasn’t sure that there was any connection at all between that history and my current condition. I couldn’t tell whether I was unique because of certain events, or whether the events actually had very little bearing on how I would turn out...In the long run, I was alive and well, and I knew some true things about my past. That was all I could say. But I was a little nervous about the fallibility of history in general, after finding out my crucial facts from Rae. So much gets lost! Historians better buckle down, I thought, and individuals keep closer track of their own private history. It can be forgotten so easily, especially if a person’s memory isn’t efficient. (51)

Or history can be forgotten if a person’s memory is forcibly funneled through a list of characteristics that will transform it and keep it from being individual, original, unique, or accurate. This passage reinforces the idea that it is difficult to get an accurate description of history from any single subjective point of view. It takes a plurality of single consciousnesses all recording their own histories to get close to an accurate description, and even then it can be ambiguous because individual memories are not always efficient. To give an example, Lucille admits that her own memory is “full of holes” because though she had been witness to Rae saving a burning man and her father wrestling an alligator that was eating his dog, she hadn’t remembered them until they came out in “family reports.” A brain that can’t hold onto memories like that “isn’t worth a dern” (51).

“History” is fallible to Lucille because history is attained through representations of events that omit certain parts, make certain parts more dominant than other parts, and sometimes distort what parts they do represent. This is Hutcheon’s postmodern awareness of history. In a sense, we never had a chance to understand history due to the way it was represented. Given history’s fallibility, Lucille (and Humphreys) does not
attempt to negate or avoid history; rather, she rallies for historians ("experts") and
individuals to do a better job in representing their own historicity from this point on.
History is also here and now.

New Historicist theory contains the idea that "literature is not a sphere apart or
distinct from the history that is relevant to it" (Murfin 224). The hurricane that ravaged
Charleston, South Carolina in *The Fireman's Fair* (1991) was no more fictional than
Charleston, South Carolina is fictional. Though the hurricane has no name in the book,
there is no doubt it originated from Hurricane Hugo which struck South Carolina’s coast
in September, 1989. Consider the following exchange between Rosemary Magee and
Josephine Humphreys during an interview:

RM: I wonder about the impact of [Hurricane Hugo] on your fiction. 
Certainly it changed the landscape of your hometown, but do you think it
changed the landscape of your fiction as well?
JH: Well, it definitely did. It changed the book I was working on at the
time. I was finished with it, more or less, when the storm came; all of a
sudden the settings that I was dependent on for the spirit of the book were
not there. And I thought, well, that doesn’t matter; that shouldn’t affect
the book. But it really did. Reality affects your whole vision of what
you’re working on. And I couldn’t go back to it right away. Some people
suggested that I just write in a hurricane at the end.
RM: How did you handle it?
JH: I rewrote the whole book in a matter of three months, taking place in
the posthurricane setting, after the hurricane. It didn’t take much rewriting
because the book was already filled with images of ruin and disaster--
which my books are all full of. For the first time they had an excuse.
(793)

In Charleston where “the past is everywhere, and you can’t get away from it,”
Humphreys had to “work out ways” to live comfortably with it, and to deal with it in her
fiction (qtd. in Magee 792). Curiously, Humphreys feels the actual doom of Hugo gave
her fictional doom some needed reality. An interesting question arises about the images
of ruin and disaster in her fiction. What images are they if not the images associated with
The Past? Is it a coincidence that The Fireman's Fair is another piece of Southern fiction with that popular old theme of ruin and disaster? It is not a coincidence. A pivotal word of the assertion "literature is not a sphere apart from the history that is relevant to it," is "relevant." Humphreys determines what part of Charleston's history is relevant to her fictional Charleston. The mere fact that she says the past is everywhere in Charleston would lead one to believe there are certainly echoes of The Past in her work. As we have seen, Southern writers are expected to confront The Past in their work. Echoes of ruin and disaster have been handed down in Southern culture, and Humphries has had to find something in her life, and in her characters' lives, to which those can correspond. And what they do correspond to are the echoes from which those echoes came, and from which the preceding ones came. Where can they ground themselves today? They land in the ruin and disaster of specific lives, moments, and hurricanes actually occurring in Josephine Humphreys's lifetime and represented in her fiction.

Ruin and disaster are Foucauldian "synchronological patternings" that have been revealed through documentations of several Southern historicities. But they do not correspond to the same specific historical occurrences of The Past that incite or produce ruin and disaster. Humphreys is like Foucault's dehistoricized man. She is an "instrument of production, a vehicle for words which exist before [her]...[which] traverse [her] as though [s]he were merely an object of nature" (Foucault 313). Ruin and disaster persist, but The Past does not. The instruments of production persist, but specific persons die. This is why it is important to document their stay, to represent them in fiction. Humphreys says, "In a novel I feel there are several purposes--but one is to tell a life as a story. Even if it's only part of a life, the narrative is a series of the events in somebody’s
"life" (Qtd. in Magee 800). The grand Southern metanarrative often misses the specific histories of Southern lives that are relevant to it. When determining how history is relevant to somebody's life story, Josephine Humphreys amends the exclusion of specific histories. But part of that process includes revealing how persons caught up in specific historicity can lose sight of The Past and the past and their relevance to the present.

In The Fireman's Fair, Rob Wyatt represents the contradictory pull of Southerners both away from and back to their history. Rob is reluctant to enter his parents' house, and his childhood home, where his mother is currently tracing eleven generations of his ancestors:

The house kept things in. He couldn't go into it without being sideswiped by history. He didn't mind history if it was recent and relevant. What he disliked was pluperfect history, a double shift into the past, into the dead and gone. The world would be better off if history were limited to the range of memory alone, and better still if the range of memory were fairly short. (151-152)

It is unclear why his mother's study in genealogy makes him uncomfortable, or what Rob is afraid she will uncover. It is unclear why he thinks the world would be better off if history were limited to the range of memory. It could be because of the history of class and race injustices associated with Charleston's Caucasians and African Americans, which remain a vague, repressed disturbance in Rob's mind throughout the novel. Rob is taken with the idea of a "lack of history," or a condition in which the "past past, the pluperfect, cannot have existed at all," a condition in which history is "no burden" (152). But Charleston's bad history is never entirely repressed in Rob's conscience and Rob knows, as does Humphreys, that a "lack of history" can only exist for a creature such as Rob's dog, Speedo, which is a condition for which Rob "envies Speedo" (152).
Humphreys has also included in the character of Rob Wyatt a perfect manifestation of how Southerners' "firm identification with a Place" and "preoccupation with one's membership in a community" have become a struggle to identify oneself in the communities of a constantly changing place. Rob feels there is "something wrong between him and his native city. There was nothing wrong with the town, but something wrong with him, and it was that he could not properly present himself, as a Charlestonian can. He had to be able to hide" (47-48).

In *The Fireman's Fair*, Charleston, South Carolina is the kind of community where maintaining business and the social circuit is the aim of the upper class. Despite the hurricane-ravaged city in which hundreds are left homeless and in great need of food and other life-sustaining provisions, the Camdens, "Mr. and Mrs. Charleston," host an extravagant "lawyer party" at which their affluent guests had to "climb a ladder to the porch, from which the screens hung in ripped flaps" (21). Rob cannot get comfortable at the party where every lawyer seems to be battling for an opportunity to chat with a renowned judge. In Rob's case, the reader is hardly sympathetic about Rob's failure to identify himself as a Charlestonian since Charlestonian identity seems synonymous with snobbery. Humphreys writes that Charleston is not a "normal town," but a "place where people continually run into each other in spite of rifts and irreconcilable differences...men who have cheated each other in business drink together at cocktail parties [and] no one seems to mind" (30). Rob Wyatt "wanted to be the opposite of a hero—a Charlestonian," but throughout he remains disconnected from his native city, "an interloper" (48).

Rob Wyatt is not the only interloper in Humphreys's South. She also identifies big business developers as interlopers. Each of the Southern states has been unique in
vegetation and habitat until big business developers built resorts and theme parks, distorting the land. In *Dreams of Sleep* (1984), Will Reese asks, “Who’s building them? Interlopers. Turning our real places into artificial places; making marshes and ponds into golf courses and pools, and selling our land back to us for two hundred thousand dollars a lot” (75). Southern geography is changing so dramatically that Southern community is forced to change as well.

Michael Kreyling’s point about the discourse of the South and Postmodernism overlooks something: discourse cannot erase geography any more than it can create it. The origin of today’s literary South is the literature about *The Past’s* geographic South. Jefferson Humphries is making a grand generalization when he says, “what we mean when we talk about the South, is not a geographical place...[but] is instead nothing in the world but an idea in narrative form, a discourse or rhetoric of narrative tropes, a story...a lie, a fiction to which we have lent reality by believing in it” (Discourse 120). I immediately wonder who “we” are and with whom “we” are talking. I think of Lyotard’s “incredulity toward metanarratives,” and his question, “Is legitimacy to be found in consensus obtained through discussion?” (72-73). If legitimacy is to be found this way, then it is important to include Josephine Humphreys in that discussion so that what we mean when we talk about the South can mean geography, too. She is aware of the view of Southern place that Jefferson Humphries holds, but she finds it too limited.

Josephine Humphreys believes the South did and does exist as more than a narrative construct. In her essay, “A Disappearing Subject Called the South,” Humphreys identifies her South as geographic place: “We have, of course, already lost our original home, the Eden of the great forests, swamps, rivers, islands, mountains.
What’s left now are tiny pockets, museums of artificially sustained wildness...Here is the so-called ‘sense of loss’ that is said to characterize Southern fiction. It is not that we lost a war. It is that we lost our place” (215). In Humphreys’s fiction, examining the past in the present includes examining how developments in and on the land now emphasize the obvious mourning over loss of what the land was. She examines the changes in the soil on which her characters stand, the vegetation surrounding them, the environmental effects on southern coastlines and the ramifications of overdevelopment. Southern geography incites tension in Southern people, and so it plays a huge role in Southern culture and Southern fiction.

The geographic South suffers another blow at the hands of big business in Humphreys’s novels: urban sprawl that engulfs, then eradicates, the smaller towns of the South. Humphreys’s Lucille Odom, who describes herself as an “animal in her native habitat,” has reason to fear this kind of doom to her place: “My town had been similarly engulfed, not by mud but by overflow from the city of Charleston, which had erupted and settled all around, leaving Mount Pleasant embedded in the middle. You might never suspect, if you were a traveler on the main route, that down this unmarked road lay a real town” (11-12). What she perceives as the loss of towns is a major motivator of Humphreys’s literature. In her essay, “Disappearing,” she says as much:

Towns are what I grieve for now. The natural setting of Southern fiction is not wilderness, nor farm nor city. It is town...Where I live, in the South Carolina Low-country, towns are hard to see. Some, like Mount Pleasant, have been swallowed whole by neighboring cities. Some, like Summerville, have spread themselves outward to link up with a neighboring spreading town, and the original boundaries of both have been lost. (217-218)
Loss and tragedy for Humphreys are rooted in loss of the actual thing about which stories are and in which stories are set. The title of her essay implies her awareness of the view held by Jefferson Humphries when he says “what we mean when we talk about the South is not a geographical place.” She points out that the subject called the South, though rich with meanings, is lacking one meaning to which she is trying to call attention, namely the land itself. The land is the South, and as a subject, that is, as an actual thing, the land is changing so much that towns are disappearing.

In addition to “land,” Humphreys is aware of “place” as deconstructionists like Linda Hutcheon, Jefferson Humphries and Michael Kreyling are aware of place, and she demonstrates her awareness in Dreams of Sleep. The rethinking of history envelops the rethinking of place and all characteristics of literature, Southern or otherwise.

Southerners can lose place without any physical destruction; in fact, without any time passing at all. One can lose place here and now, this moment. When ironically rethinking history, what has led to here and now, or how that which has led to here and now has been said to have happened, one realizes the ambiguity associated with “here” and “now.” Place, as one knows it, is lost among points of view and representations, or it is and has been only truly in the eye of each beholder. Place is fragmented.

In Dreams of Sleep, Will Reese contemplates this fragmentation:

Once this whole house was the home of one family. Is this how things fall apart, then? Not in sudden collapse, but by slow fragmentation. Houses turn into apartments, estates into subdivisions. We can’t sustain the things we used to sustain: dynasties, clans, big families; we can’t even maintain their monuments. Statues are losing their noses, tombstones their letters. Growing up in an old city, you learn history’s one true lesson: that history fades. Nothing sticks together for very long without immense effort. (112)
The decay of the monuments to history can be said to represent the decay of representation. The grand metanarrative of the South as Jefferson Humphries, and Lewis Simpson, and Michael Kreyling see it, is crumbling. If the South and the history of the South are recognized as a fiction, that is, as numerous representations, then the present tension for the Southern writer (who must, according to lists and definitions, always be grounded in a sense of loss and defeat) is the imminent loss of the Southern; unless immense effort is spent to keep it alive. Maintaining the Southern novel’s trademarks in a way that requires Southerners to perpetuate tension from *The Past* is an example of such immense effort.

Without the effort, the implication is that Southerners today are facing an apocalypse of identity, which is difficult to grasp. Josephine Humphreys and her contemporary Southern writing colleagues do not attain identities through *The Past*, nor do their characters, so how could a loss of tension about *The Past* cause them to lose their identities? Rather than trying to carry on with the Southern narrative trope of tension about *The Past*, Humphreys contains the past within the range of her characters’ memories. It is from the events in their lives and their memories that they take on identities. While Jefferson Humphries and Michael Kreyling are spiraling downward toward or away from an idea of the South that they say doesn’t exist, Josephine Humphreys is standing on the ground of the South which she knows exists. From there, she writes about the South. The impending apocalypse of place for Humphreys is not occurring due to semantic problems, but due to the impending apocalypse of the land.

The impending apocalypse of land is a theme in all of Humphreys’s novels. In *Rich in Love*, Lucille Odom uses “invision” to examine the impending apocalypse:
I called it invision because it was almost as if I could see into things. I could not take my eyes off physical objects...[t]hings glittered at me as I rode past. They had started glittering after I read in the paper about a study done by Clemson University scientists concerning the greenhouse effect...Their computer had generated a map of the coastline of South Carolina as it would appear fifty years from now...We were not on it...So every time I looked at my own yard, every time I rode the bicycle, I saw not the good old world I had known forever, but a world it was nearly time to say good-bye to. Beauty doubled and tripled around me. The place was doomed. (7-8)

In this passage, the geographical place is doomed, and so its people are doomed, and so the ideas, the representations of it are doomed, that is, the representations of it as it exists in that moment. When the place changes significantly, so will the way it is viewed and represented. For these reasons, documenting here and now is extremely important to the character, Lucille.

Documenting here and now is evidently important to Lucille’s creator. Humphreys lives in a time and place where studies on the greenhouse effect have given many citizens a sense of geographic doom. She is fictionalizing the real doom of the present, which is the doom that will be history in the future. Documenting The Past was important for the same reasons. Southern society experienced great change after warring with the North, which changed the way everyone viewed both North and South. The literary responses to these changes are their documentations. We now understand Faulkner’s sense of tragic loss as it was to him. The South in which he was born and reared was populated with people who were still reeling from the war’s devastation. Postwar disillusionment was the flavor of the South at the time in which Faulkner was writing. What would be gained from contemporary Southerners trying to adopt that specific disillusionment and loss as their own (which is impossible) and then passing it on to future generations and having it color their documentations of their heres and their
nows? The South will mean something different to them naturally. Will it not still be the South? It will be a South with plaques, monuments, statues, documents, and literature about *The Past*, and the past, but it will exist with its own historicity—the historicity of each life.

After a hurricane has ravaged the place in *The Fireman's Fair*, Rob Wyatt stands surveying the surreal scene of destruction with his own invision:

[N]ow, and here, one saw extraordinary things...He was struck by a certain beauty in the scene, the beauty that comes in any aftermath and is difficult to pin down. Was it really there, in the objects themselves? The houses pink and cream and gold, looked brighter than normal, sparkling in the swept air...Or was all that shine and tone in the eyes of the beholder? The beholder’s eyes had been known to read beauty where no one else could see it. (1,7)

The difference in the two novels’ moments of invision is that doom has already struck the place in the second one. *The Fireman's Fair* is a story of rebuilding. Nothing will be the same as it was, but it will survive anew. Likewise, so will the “ever-doomed” South, albeit through the many lenses of the marginalized storytellers that have been silent or left out until now. The South has no choice about its new image. Its image changes with every imaginer. As long as the imaginers have a geographic place in which to dwell, there will be an image of that place. We stand to have a fuller, richer image of Southern place if Southern writers are encouraged to move away from that part of *The Past* which is Rubin’s, Hobson’s, and Simpson’s codifying list of Southern characteristics. There is definitely a Southern present that examines itself in relation to *The Past*, and one could safely bet that there always will be. But we disallow ourselves a chance to understand Southern present if we continue to read representations of the Southern present exclusively in relation to *The Past*. We have a better chance to understand the South’s
present if, in addition to examinations of representations involving *The Past*, we examine representations which focus on the historicity of now and which are not consumed by *The Past*.

Humphreys is revealing that with the loss of real Southern towns comes a loss of a real sense of community. She demonstrates that Southern community has come to equal Southern commodity. The destruction of Southern place by outsiders in big business has drastically changed community. This kind of change dates back to Henry Grady’s original notion of “The New South.” Differentiating the New South from the Old South in his New South creed, Grady spoke of the industrial aim of the New South. This industrialization was not without environmental consequences. When writing about the loss of place, Humphreys stands in good literary company with opposers to the New South creed from one century ago:

Southern writers responded ambivalently to the ideology of the New South, and a number of them, including Sidney Lanier, Joel Chandler Harris, Charles W. Chestnutt, and Ellen Glasgow, turned against the movement. They disliked its extreme materialism, recalled with nostalgia a more pastoral South, and yearned for an “arcadian alternative” to the dominant direction of American life...Indiscriminate industry hunting on the basis of cheap labor and generous community subsidies proved costly in social terms. The benefits of industrial growth and rampant urbanization seemed to become less certain in light of adverse environmental and social consequences. (Grantham 244-245)

Within the New South came the bifurcation of the Southern enemy that remains today. The New South had as enemies Southerners themselves. Southern animosity and sense of loss were not exclusively about losing a war, or race relations. It is about this sense of loss that Humphreys says, “It is not that we lost a war, it is that we lost our place.” Anyone, Northern or Southern, who turns place into commodity at the expense of place is
an enemy of the place, and a community of enemies would seem to be a contradiction in terms.

Today, Southern communities still house this contradiction, as Humphreys demonstrates in *Dreams of Sleep*. There is in the contemporary literary gamut what Fred Hobson calls “the Ohio-Bashing School of Southern Fiction” (60), which the disparity between Humphreys’s Will Reese and Duncan Nesmith displays:

> What Will has against Duncan is not that he married Marcella...but that he came from Ohio. Ohioans love what they think is the South. Boiled shrimp, debutantes, the Civil War,—they’re gaga over every bit of it, fueling the tourist industry in Charleston and Savannah and New Orleans and every town that has a plaque or a monument. Who knows why... And now they are not only vacationing here. They’re buying condos. They’re staying year-round and investing in real estate, restaurants, inns, banks; buying up farmland as if the South were some non-English-speaking banana republic crying for development in the image of Ohio. And they’re sneaky. They operate out of Atlanta with dummy corporations, so you think you’re selling the family place to young men from Georgia...you hate to sell but it’s part of the New South right? But the New South is Ohio warmed over...They aren’t even Yankees—the old enemy. They’re good guys. Americans. (Dreams 47-48)

Duncan is Will’s stepfather who has a career in land-development. Will never forgives his father for dying, or his mother, Marcella, for living happily after his father’s death and achieving a successful career in real estate. He never forgives Marcella for marrying the obese Duncan Nesmith and working together with him to exploit Southern land. Duncan is planning to build a pirate theme park on the Charleston coast. When Duncan tells Will, “I barely got the jump on an Atlanta outfit for the options, and there’s a bunch of Kuwaitis making me offers already,” Will replies, “We’d rather have you than those fuckers. Atlantans and Arabs! They’re the same, except the Arabs are cleaner. Atlantans will mess with anything” (181). Duncan continues to miss the point of Will’s indignation and presses further with his pirate theme park idea: “This is local money.
Local people. In fact the initial idea came from them. Quite a few names you’d recognize...They think since I’m sort of an outsider I’m the best one to get it off the ground. Later, everybody’ll be behind it” (181). At this, Will finally explodes: “no true son of this city would back a goddamned pirate park right there on the river! Don’t try to tell me it’s local money...It’s money without history. It’s cut loose, and roams, raids us. Buys what of us it wants”(182). If a pervading sense of loss must be a Southern characteristic, then Josephine Humphreys is showing that Southerners’ “loss” now has less of a tie to The Past. The money fueling the business industry that destroys the geographic South is money without Southern history, i.e., with no tie to The Past.

Also, it is not only Southerners who are aspiring to permanence through preservation of the historical Old South. Rather, in this passage, it is midwesterners who are striving to preserve what Humphreys says they think is the South. What is the difference between what Ohioans think is the South--“boiled shrimp, debutantes, the Civil War”--and what critics like Jefferson Humphries, Lewis Simpson and Michael Kreyling think is the South--Doom, Loss, the Civil War? In both cases, Southerners and Southern writers are being asked to reflect a nostalgic wish list. Ohioans have the money to try to make their Southern community wish lists into a reality (albeit a simulacrum), and critics have the press to try to make theirs into reality (albeit another simulacrum).

In Dreams of Sleep, Will Reese notices that the resort he and his family visit, though very old, has one thing in common with the new ones being built: it is a reflection of old Southern community, not old Southern community itself.

He drove out to Bloody Marsh, where the Spanish were defeated and turned back...He drove to Fort Frederica, the first English settlement in Georgia, of which nothing now remains but the brick outline of each house in the ground, like a life-size map laid out under the giant oaks at a
bend in the Frederica River..."Those are real places," he said. "This"--the
pool, the women, the yellow umbrellas--"is a fake place." (76).

Southerners are being fed the South as it is imagined and fashioned by outsiders who are
moving in, and some are quite readily eating it up. This is Jean Beaudrillard’s
"precession of simulacra"\(^1\) at work. We are so far removed from the real, the original,
that we live instead in a world of the "hyperreal" (342).

In Dreams of Sleep, Duncan’s plan for a theme park in South Carolina
demonstrates Southerners living in a world of the hyperreal and ignites Will’s anger at
the destruction of what’s left of the original, the real South:

"[W]e want to avoid any comparison with Disney World. This
will be much more low-key, more in tune with the environment and
related to the historical traditions of the area..."
"What’s the theme?"
"Pirates. To tie in with the riverfront. We’ll have a couple of
pirate ships that actually go out, take people on the river, out to Drum
Island, where we’ll give them maps to dig for buried treasure. Everything
will have the pirate theme. Our hotel, the restaurant, the villas. It’s
natural because there really were pirates here. One of them was hanged on
the Battery. We plan to reenact it." (178)

Even the mention of Disney World makes it a comparison of two fakes. It conjures
Beaudrillard’s idea of a simulation of a simulation. Despite Duncan’s belief that this is
some type of preservation of the real by reenactment, he admits that in order to build it,
"we do have to fill in a limited amount of marshland" (178). In other words, he has to
amend the original in the image of the fake in order to make the fake “like” the original.

---

\(^1\) "Abstraction today is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no
longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without
origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is
the map that precedes the territory--Precession of Simulacra--it is the map that engenders the territory and
if we were to revive the fable today, it would be the territory whose shreds are slowly rotting across the
map." (342-343)
Beaudrillard uses Disneyland to explain his concept of the hyperreal and the imaginary:

Disneyland is a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulation. To begin with it is a play of illusions and phantasms: Pirates, the Frontier, Future World, etc. This imaginary world is supposed to be what makes the operation successful...The objective profile of America, then, may be traced throughout Disneyland...All its values are exalted here, in miniature and comic strip form...This...serves to cover over a third-order simulation: Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the “real” country, all of “real” America, which is Disneyland...Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact...the America surrounding it [is] no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and simulation. (351-352)

The hyperrealization of the South that has been occurring in Humphreys’s lifetime is a part of history which she has determined relevant for her fiction. She demonstrates another example of Beaudrillard’s “third-order simulation” in Rich in Love. Lucille is on a tour bus watching the tourists’ reactions, a “deadly sameness” on their faces, to what they are seeing in her hometown of Charleston: “I could tell what the trouble was: they had been to Epcot. After Epcot, Charleston is hardly worth seeing; no dinosaurs are going to lunge at you on the Battery, no music comes out of the azaleas. After Epcot, a real place is boring. There’s something very thrilling about the fake” (186). Humphreys also addresses Beaudrillard’s third-order simulation in “Disappearing”: “In parts of the South, we are actually building fake towns...I see a parallel tendency in our fiction, the increasing output of ‘Southern’ works set in a ‘South’ that can’t be found in reality or even in history, an exaggerated and quaint fake place” (219).

The dichotomy between real and fake is demonstrated in more than one way by Humphreys. Traversing the terrain between signifier and signified is what helps Humphreys subvert the characteristic of Southern literature on Rubin’s list which states
that Southern authors have “a storytelling bent (as compared with a concern for
Problems).” In her essay about exiled Southern writers, Eve Shelnutt says, “It was, in
fact, my early rejection of this aspect of Southern writing that made my writing as a
Southerner atypical. It was not that I did not admire many storytelling stories, but I was
concerned with Problems, one of which was: What are the political implications of the
storytelling story?” (6). Humphreys asks the same question in regard to what makes a
story a story: What are the political implications that are inextricable from the language
that comprises a story? From whose consciousness does that story come? She
demonstrates the complexities associated with stories, language, and meaning in Lucille’s
narration of Rich in Love.

Lucille is in a continual struggle to find words that can convey the meaning of her
story. She is given the ability to recognize it as story and tells an implied reader so from
the opening sentence: “On an afternoon two years ago my life veered from its day-in
day-out course and became for a short while the kind of life that can be told as a story--
that is, one in which events appear to have meaning” (1). Right away, the reader is cued
that the events (s)he is about to read appear to have meaning, so the perspective of the
decipherer is made relevant. Can we trust the narrator, who has made meaning for us out
of the events of her life using language she recognizes as unstable, to tell her story to us?
Since it’s Lucille’s life story, she can be considered the “expert” in the way that Lyotard
would call her an expert. She’s the best one to narrate her own story since no other can
know it better than she, but there is still the problem of the legitimizing function of
narrative. Lucille’s recognition of her story as “story” comprised of infirm language
undermines any narrator omniscience.
Paul Maltby's essay, "Dissident Postmodernists: Barthelme, Coover, Pynchon," contains a discussion about "storifying" reality that is pertinent to Lyotard's notion of the legitimizing function of narrative, to Lucille's struggle to convey her story, and to contemporary Southerners' concern for the problems associated with the storytelling story:

The search for meaning, the endeavor to interpret the world, is perceived as a process of fictionalizing reality, of "storifying" it. It is understood that extradiscursive referents--historical events, social processes, natural phenomena--can only be apprehended in narrative form, never in their pure, naked state, that is "as they really are." (529-530)

Humphreys's character handles the struggle to express things "as they really are" in three ways: She makes up words, she traces etymologies and uses Latin whenever she can, and finally she relies on what Shelley Jackson calls a semiotic maternal metalanguage.

When describing the vegetation around her town, Lucille knows the look of the weeds, but not their names. "So [she] named them. Spanish Thistle, Heart-of-the-Moon, Beanweed. That way [she] could think about them better" (11). As the story's narrative "expert," Lucille is stuck using referents which are not expressed in conformity with what they actually are (Lyotard 80). There are obvious political implications involved in making up words in a language. Ihab Hassan put it best in "Towards a Concept of Postmodernism": "Let us admit it: there is a will to power in nomenclature, as well as in people or texts. A new term opens for its proponents a space in language" (275).

Throughout the text, Lucille is learning to open and move in a space of her own. Even

---

2 "Lucille's desire to maintain the patriarchal family unit demands that she negate something 'feminist' as within the realm of the 'real.' There is no language for this kind of desire, so Humphreys experiments with a metalanguage that Helen imparts to her daughter in which no dichotomy between feminism and reality exists. Humphreys gives this metalanguage a political purpose. She never makes it quite clear what the semiotic is here; it defies verbal explanation. But she makes it quite clear what it is not. It is not Latin and the classical, patriarchal world it represents. Nor is it English which represents cultural constructs that do not house female desire and do not readily house constructions for speaking of desire." (Jackson 283)
though she recognized early on “my natural language was all private. What came out when I spoke was only a hacked-up version of the thoughts that lay graceful and complete in my brain,” it takes the unraveling of the entire story for her to become, if not comfortable, at least capable of living with this fact.

Before she acquires Lyotard’s ability to tolerate the incommensurable, she uses Latin for what she believes are its “precision” and ability to “pin things down”:

> English, I realized, didn’t even have a subjunctive mood, for use “in matters of supposal, desire, possibility,” according to the grammar note...My moods, the feelings that came upon me without warning and seemed to have no name—that’s what they were. Subjunctive moods, somewhere between what’s real and what’s not. Maybe they were nameless in English, but in Latin they were well recognized and given grammatical status. (217)

But even Latin doesn’t always suffice for Lucille: “I think often of the ancient times, long before Latin, where words were new and had no connotations. Pure words stood for single things: ‘Family’ meant people in a house together. But that was in a language so far back that all its words are gone, a language we can only imagine” (260).

What Lucille is left with is Jackson’s “metalanguage” that Helen Odom claims to have imparted to Lucille and Rae as babies long before they could use language: “She said the baby understood things and had its own thoughts, but just could not yet make English words with its tongue and lips. Its own language of coos and burbles was one you could understand if you gave it half a try” (*Rich* 48). This maternal language is the thoughts that lie graceful and complete in Lucille’s mind. The desire to transform those thoughts to language, to be a woman telling her own history, is a desire for which there is not language, but which Jackson noted has been seen in Southern literature before: “It describes Addie Bundren’s ‘dark land talking the voiceless speech’ where ‘words don’t
ever fit even what they are trying to say at’” (283). Humphreys’s words do “fit what they
are trying to say at” since part of what she’s saying is that something is always lost in the
translation between the real and the telling. The inability of language to adequately
convey meaning is representative of a giant problem with storytelling stories, of which
Humphreys is clearly aware. Though Humphreys is not a dissident postmodern writer
like Barthelme, Coover, or Pynchon, she is successful in revealing the gap between
signifier and signified when she writes about past, place, community, and family.

In Humphreys’s novels, what Rubin referred to as “a strong sense of family” is
more of a strong sense of the groups of people who get included under—or excluded
from—the umbrella term family. As Elinor Walker says, “family is a changing signifier
which may finally be defunct” (304). Humphreys examines family in every novel, but
family is imbued with so many different meanings that meaning is lost. In Dreams of
Sleep and Rich in Love, Humphreys explores reactions to the realization that “family”
was associated with a stability that no longer exists. The word “family” is not
synonymous with permanence, blood kin, or traditional familial roles.

Alice Reese, wife and mother, is one of three main characters in Dreams of Sleep.
When told from Alice’s point of view, family refers to an old traditional sense of family
where mother, father and children reside in the same dwelling:

In the suburbs as shown on television, women drink coffee together in
their kitchens and men borrow tools from each other. But here people
keep to themselves. The Reeses are the only people on the block who live
in a family. The others live alone—students, homosexuals, Navy people—
or in groups not identifiable as families. (7)

Though Alice identifies her husband and children as family in an old traditional sense,
Humphreys demonstrates the precariousness of their linkage by presenting Alice’s
thoughts about family. Alice is not the type of mother that one would conjure when thinking about family in a traditional sense, since the duties associated with being married and raising children are more than Alice Reese can handle. “There are things she has to do, such as feed the children—a duty that weighs on her mind like a concrete block tied to sink something in a sea” (9). She hires Iris as a babysitter because she knows Iris will serve as a better mother than she can.

The Moon family suffers from a poorer structure than the Reese family. Owen Moon, “...deposited his family here in Charleston, South Carolina, and left it to hold together on its own, now he comes sneaking back to make raids on it, nabbing what he wants” (15). Owen has a wife in St. Cloud, Florida (he never legally married Fay Moon) and an unspecified number of more children. According to Iris’ estranged sister, Patrice, Owen “...has a family there, a job and a family, in a real house...[not] a mobile home” (84). Fay has had four children with Owen. The first was “taken from her...because she was fifteen,” her second, Patrice, was raised by an aunt in Berkeley, and she kept Iris and Randall (16). Iris has “no love” for Owen, Fay, or Randall, whom she has likened to a dog. They are no more than a duty to her, and she is no longer willing to “struggle to make a family out of those scraps of people” (16). She prefers, instead, to adopt the Reese family, whom she has seen in photographs. She tries to will herself a part of their family and make the children her own. Randall’s point of view is never shown. With the Moons, Humphreys has radically shaken the signifier “family.” She starts an amalgamation process for family. The signifier “family” must expand in order to include the Moons and their extensions and adoptees.
Rich in Love chronicles family very closely. From the beginning, the reader understands this is a story about family as seen through the eyes of Lucille Odom: “All around me I saw the American family blowing apart, as described in Psychology Today. The American family needed to hold itself more closely, I thought. Like mine. We were a hermit family. We had each other and we had our house, and nothing could touch us” (15), and later, “We were not just two parents with two children, we were the Odoms, something more mysteriously amalgamated than a regular couple-with-kids. Or so I thought” (29). Again, Helen Odom is not the type of mother who can be part of a family in that old traditional sense onto which Lucille was holding. After Helen abandons her family, leaving a cursory note explaining that it is “time for [her] to start a second life...Please tell Lucille,” (18) Lucille is forced to confront her mother’s “nonchalance” about their family. And sometimes, she slips into believing “my place was special, my family was special, I myself was perhaps also special and...[t]he present discombobulation was temporary, maybe even a sort of test to see if we were the tough and virtuous family I had always said we were” (32). But she learns that family is not synonymous with permanence.

The other families in Rich In Love are the Pooles and the Frobinesses. “Rhody Poole, daughter of crazy Sam...had had a baby at age fourteen and given it to her mother; and that baby, Evelyn, called its grandmother ‘mama’ and its mama ‘Rhody,’ and the Poole family lived together without confusion” (23). Whatever confusion an outsider might feel about the Poole family, the family itself knows none. I believe Humphreys is indicating that the titles for members of a family are not enough to explain or cover the
connection between them. What does it matter who is called "mama" or "daddy"? The persons to whom they refer are interchangeable.

The defunct signifiers of familial titles are also demonstrated in *The Fireman's Fair* in Billie Poe's relationship with Carlo. Carlo bought Billie from her parents for four hundred dollars when Billie was thirteen. He raised her, "paid for music and dancing lessons, YMCA, signed [her] school permissions," then when she was eighteen they had a mock wedding, which Carlo said was real, and after which he referred to her as his wife, although they never consummated the "marriage" (111). The terms that were used to signify familial connections cannot apply to Billie and Carlo. Carlo was like a father, in that he performed duties for her that a father would be expected to perform, and Billie was like a daughter in that she lived with an older man who was taking care of her, but those terms later turned into like a wife and like a husband. Family cannot signify what it used to if this is the case. Rubin's "strong sense of family" has become a strong sense of the defunct signifier "family." This brings me to my exploration of Humphreys's treatment of the last characteristic on Rubin's list.

Southern literary critics' unusually vivid consciousness of the consciousness about caste, class and race in the South is one reason why Southerners would understandably wish to make a break from the history that they consider a burden. Racial tensions remain associated with the South despite claims like the ones made by Jack Butler and Marcus Gandy: "What about race? Black and white do not exist in harmony now anywhere in the South, or anywhere else, for that matter" (Butler 36). "'America is Mississippi now,' Gandy says, 'You don't think it is? You wrong'" (qtd. in Butler 37). In his introduction to *The Future of Southern Letters*, John Lowe asks, "if Fred Hobson is
right that a certain power has been lost in southern letters, is that because the old agonies of the South—particularly those connected with race—have somewhat abated? Or is it merely that what used to be seen as a local tragedy has passed into the realm of the nation?” (18)

Humphreys handles race the same way she handles history. She does not neglect The Past as it corresponds to race, nor does she make race the central theme in the Southern lives she is representing. In Rich in Love, an African American, Rhody Poole, serves as Caucasian Lucille Odom’s second “shadow” mother and mentor (72). As Elinor Ann Walker points out, the characters in the novel are aware of The Past with regard to racial tensions, but those issues are irrelevant when it comes to the love and unbreakable connection between them now:

Lucille’s sense of tragedy is rooted in the fragmentation of the family, not guilt and shame over the enslavement of an entire people. Although Lucille readily admits to “three hundred years of bad history” that “sat brooding over us like a thunderhead” (108), she trusts Rhody, with whom she shares a bond that is stronger than her bond with her own family. It is Rhody who diagnoses the problems of the family, and it is her voice that commands authority and wisdom. (311)

Humphreys’s African American characters display aplomb and impart wisdom and truth to her struggling Caucasian characters, and vice versa. Humphreys’s African American characters are intelligent, or unintelligent, bookish, artistic, articulate, criminal, honest, loving, and resentful. Sometimes they contribute to stereotypes as Caucasians, Southerners, or Northerners do, and sometimes not.

A conspicuous problem with Humphreys’s representation of race in the South arises in The Fireman’s Fair in the character of Albert Swan. It never quite feels as if Albert really belongs in this novel. He seems to be presented for the sake of his race. It
is hard to tell whether Humphreys believes her fictitious race relation between Rob and Albert is believable, that is, an accurate depiction of the historicity of race relations here and now, or whether she is acting out of an unusually vivid consciousness of that Southern literary characteristic upon which she knows critics will focus. For instance, although Rob Wyatt is a Caucasian character whose best friend Albert is an African American, the reader has been told that Rob “often had trouble speaking to black people: not because he had nothing to say but because what he wanted to say was impossible (‘I am with you; I am on your side’). So he would mumble something meant to convey fellow feeling without going overboard, usually failing” (11). Rob’s unease with African Americans may stem from the South’s bad history of race relations, and he doesn’t know how to fit the past into the present. Not wanting to be a racist, Rob forces communication with African Americans in a way that so highlights racial difference, it becomes racist; except with Albert.

At the end of the novel, when Rob has just about destroyed his chances to have meaningful relationships with every Caucasian character, Albert hides out in the dark night and waits to tackle Rob. For reasons unspecified, he does tackle Rob before telling him, “You been acting like a spoiled white kid who don’t see nothing, don’t know how to treat women right, like to pretend you got a nigger friend,” and then violently punches Rob in the head twice (226). While Rob is down, Albert tells him the story of his hospitalized schizophrenic mother and his father who is in jail for murdering a white man. After this moment of clarity introduced by Albert, Rob begins to act in a way that earns him the respect of the people he almost lost. He makes peace with his parents, wins girlfriend-Billie back, and remains on good terms with Louise and Hank even though he
almost destroyed their marriage. With Albert as the unlikely provider of clarity and insight into Rob’s life story, and its unrealistic happy ending, *The Fireman’s Fair* smacks of romance. Rob’s and Albert’s relationship with each other is as forced as Humphreys’s writing about their relationship.

Perhaps Humphreys is under the pressure that African American poet Brenda Marie Osbey says is specific to contemporary Caucasian Southern writers:

> There is a certain amount of pressure however, both private and public, that says that white southern writers must struggle with [race relations]... So I think that there’s a pressure for whites that doesn’t exist for black writers...for us, there isn’t anything to work out. It’s inconceivable for whites to write about the South without including black characters, but it’s easy for me to write all-black poetry. (qtd. in Lowe 117)

In each novel, Humphreys’s African American characters remain in the lower echelons of her fictional communities, living in substandard housing, and serving as “shadow” figures to Caucasians, but they continually pop in with sage advice for the Caucasian characters at all the crucial moments. They fit too neatly into the stereotype of broken-hearted saviors. If, as Osbey says, African American writers have nothing to work out in terms of race relations, then contemporary Southern Caucasian writers are forced to work out alone both the century-old tensions and the current nation-wide tensions, which can result in unrealistic representations of race relations like Albert’s and Rob’s.

Humphreys does go a long way in accurately representing a hierarchy that she believes remains among African Americans and Caucasians in Charleston. Having become a lawyer and a supposedly affluent member of Charleston society, Rob was able to afford a fifteen hundred-dollar view from a luxury apartment at the top of Fort Sumter House. From this position up top, Rob was able to look down on the “black” people who gathered along the seawall on Sundays:
From up in the Fort Sumter House, all those black people looked happy. But white residents in houses along the boulevard had complained to the cops about the music and the litter, their real worry the sight of so many black people gathered in one place. Ordinarily, the city was a model of racial harmony. Blacks stayed uptown, quite harmoniously. But if they came downtown, if they congregated, the white people got nervous... Fifteen hundred was what people paid to be above it all. But a view from on high is not the most accurate. It’s pretty, but it’s not entirely true, omitting the single heartbreak. (53)

The view that is privileged, the “view from on high,” is the white man’s view.

Humphreys demonstrates that in Charleston there are still persons who ignore racial hierarchies, and who pay for the privilege of avoiding racial hierarchies. Rob was unceasingly uncomfortable as a result of his awareness of his “privileged” view, so he moved to a more integrated neighborhood.

In Dreams of Sleep, Alice Reese is also representative of citizens who are mostly complacent about what they think are old racial tensions. There is a minor disturbance on the surface of her consciousness at recognizing the separateness, but she doesn’t dig any further than that.

Blacks and whites live farther apart than ever, like the double curve of a hyperbolic function, two human worlds of identical misery and passion but occupying opposite quadrants, nonintersecting. In a way, equal but separate. One day something will blow up, but Alice doesn’t know whether it will be the world or the South or the Reese family. (133-134)

Alice perceives the “black neighborhood” as a “haven” of better, more truthful living than her own white neighborhood (133). But Alice also thinks African Americans feel “identical” miseries and passions as Caucasian Americans. She never asks why, if that is the case, they remain in separate worlds.

Humphreys does a fine job of representing Caucasian apathy, but it starts to seem counterfeit in its one-sidedness. In three novels, she only includes one instance of an
African American pandering to old Southern stereotypes and helping to perpetuate racial separatism. In *Dreams of Sleep*, when Hank Camden hired Albert to bartend at an upscale soiree for people in the legal profession, Rob Wyatt expressed disdain for Albert’s ability to speak “multilingually:”

“Quite a storm, wasn’t it Albert?” Hank said.
“That’s right.”
“I hope your home wasn’t damaged.”
“No, sir, everything fine. Just fine.”

Rob moved away from the bar. He didn’t want to talk to Albert when he was like that, sloughing verbs deliberately. Albert was multilingual; he could speak the language his listener wanted to hear. (24)

Humphreys does not give any support to the idea that Hank Camden “wants to hear” Albert sloughing verbs. But she does indicate that Rob does not want to. Albert is making a racist choice about Hank Camden.

The South today is full of multilingualists like Albert Swan. It is a rich mix of races and racist individuals who fight against separatism and who fight to perpetuate separatism in the name of racial pride. There are those like James Applewhite who believe that though “the nation is now sharing in the shame of racial prejudice,” the southern writer is “not absolved of her or his responsibility to encounter again and yet again, in language, those earlier tragedies, inequities, and losses, which urge the further completion of the uncreated conscience of this place” (29). And there are those like Kate Daniels who believe that though “the New South’s way of forgiving itself its racial history” is to sometimes create written fantasies in which the victims easily forgive the perpetrators--which does not absolve the perpetrators--still “the future will not be served by the propagation of old attitudes, nor by breast-beating or paralyzing guilt” (69). And
there are some like Brenda Marie Osbey who are living the autochthonous ideal in the South:

I guess it never occurred to me to write about white characters. In particular, I don’t pay that much attention to whites in New Orleans... White people weren’t like really real people... I came of age in the 70s [when] Black Power was real, civil rights was the past. As a result, I never focused on race relations. I was interested in race, but not in race relations. Also, I see New Orleans as a distinctly black space, and I see whites as marginal. I grew up in a very black New Orleans. Our doctors were black, our attorneys [sic], my school principals, all our authority figures were black. I’ve read these novels set in the 20s and 30s where some black child is forced to grovel before white authority figures. I never saw that. It never occurred to me to view blackness as a problem... I haven’t anything to work out in terms of race relations, and that’s why I don’t write about it. The South is the locale of memory, not only of the tortured past. Zora Neale Hurston, with her insistence on focusing on the black celebration of life and on the black self-sufficient community, helped us to see that. We need to see more of that in black southern letters. (qtd. in Lowe 116-118)

Having also come of age when “civil rights was the past and black power was real,” Humphreys may not have anything to work out either when it comes to race relations.

Even though the South is also “a locale of memory” which includes things that don’t pertain to “the tortured past,” Josephine Humphreys, as a Caucasian Southern writer, is perhaps in the peculiar position of being unable to fully represent an authochthonous ideal due to the unusually vivid consciousness of Caucasian writers’ treatment of the old literary trademark.

Like Lucille Odom’s memory full of holes, there is another type of memory that “isn’t worth a dern” for Southerners: selective memory. I have examined the ways in which Humphreys points out that holes in memories leave us with incomplete, and therefore skewed presentations of history, but what about the selective memories which bring a few dominant points to the fore in a way that overshadows everything else?
Rubin’s list of Southern literary characteristics is an example of such a memory. In her novels, Humphreys’s “redefinition” of these characteristics involves trying to imbue place and history with so many perspectives that no single one stands above another. She is working within the Rubin generation’s system in order to change it. Her adherence to those characteristics may help emancipate current and future Southern writers from them.
Works Cited:


