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Gothic Landscapes of the South

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Abstract

Surveying the development of the Southern Gothic landscape, Sivils locates its origins in seventeenth-century captivity narratives by figures such as Garcilaso de la Vega and Captain John Smith. He then traces the cultural evolution of the Southern Gothic landscape through a selection of texts by Henry Clay Lewis, Charles Chesnutt, William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor and others. Referencing critics such as María del Pilar Blanco and Yi-Fu Tuan—and placing emphasis upon the portrayal of the swamp as related to issues of racial oppression—Sivils ultimately argues that these landscapes function as much more than just passive settings. They are, rather, dynamic sites of haunting that reflect, and at times participate in, the South's legacy of human and environmental abuse.

From Henry Clay Lewis's moss strewn bayous, to Flannery O'Connor's roadside nightmare of murder in the pines, to the pungent post-industrial psychosphere of HBO's *True Detective*, anyone with even a passing acquaintance with the Southern Gothic has encountered the region's potential for inspiring ever-verdant myrioramas of beauty and dread. This atmosphere is further enhanced by the common spectacle of abandoned, rusting, or otherwise disintegrating shacks, trucks, tractors, and other artefacts of a not-too-distant past, that, in their weed-wrapped embrace, seem emblematic of humanity's legacy in the South. These scenes render a well-known brand of

Southern sublime, a lushness flecked with decay. Yet these landscapes are also aligned with a pervasive sense of the grotesque, swallowing, and at times spitting back, the virulence of humanity's ills. In considering a selection of influential Southern Gothic texts, this chapter examines how the region's landscapes function not only as sites upon which atrocities occur but also as cultural nexuses where the present is haunted by repressed apparitions from the past.

I begin with a brief consideration of the Southern Gothic landscape's origins in two seventeenth-century captivity narratives. I then move to an examination of how Lewis, Charles Chesnut, Kate Chopin, and other nineteenth-century writers popularized the image of the southern landscape as an ambivalent realm haunted by the spectre of slavery. I end by considering how later authors have continued that tradition while also embedding within it a recognition that the trauma of environmental abuse creates a new form of southern haunting, one in which the land preys upon and even at times enacts vengeance against its human abusers. Throughout this chapter I use the term *landscape* in keeping with one of its most common definitions: 'A tract of land with its distinguishing characteristics and features, esp. considered as a product of modifying or shaping processes and agents (usually natural)' (*Oxford English Dictionary*). I veer slightly from this definition by placing emphasis upon the idea that the Southern Gothic landscape functions as a dynamic, and even anthropomorphized entity. I stress the idea that while it is often designated by its non-human characteristics, the concept of the landscape (literary or otherwise) cannot be understood without appreciating the fact that humanity—through our actions, our perceptions, and our imaginings—shares in virtually every aspect of its being.

Recently, critics such as Patricia Yaeger, Lee Rozelle, Tom Hillard, and María del Pilar Blanco have variously argued that the literary landscape (often presented as an analogue for the

natural world) deserves more attention as a source of, and emblem for, a wide range of horrors. Hillard contends, ‘Since the Gothic inevitably finds its source in cultural contradictions where Gothic nature exists so too can be found competing perceptions of what that “nature” signifies’ (694). Indeed, in so many Gothic works the landscape represents more than just a setting; it is a threatening embodiment of the land itself, of that oft-abused supplier of our human needs. Such landscapes not only foster an important element of terror but also represent a sort of warehouse of cultural and individual anxieties relating to the social issues in play. The cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, in describing what he terms ‘landscapes of fear’ (6) writes,

Every cultivated field is wrested out of nature, which will encroach upon the field and destroy it but for ceaseless human effort. ... Of course, a landscape of farmstead and cultivated field does not directly evoke fear. ... The farmstead is a haven, we say, but haven implies threat: one idea leads to the other. Consider now the hostile forces. Some of them, such as disease and drought, cannot be perceived directly with the naked eye. A landscape of disease is a landscape of disease’s dire effects: deformed limbs, corpses, crowded hospitals and graveyards.

(7)

Too often in the South the ‘ceaseless human effort’ was ceaseless dehumanized slave effort, and for European Americans there arose a fear not only of the cultivated landscape reverting to wilderness for lack of human dominance, but also a fear of losing mastery over a wronged racial other. For slaves and the otherwise abused, the landscape—especially when allowed to fester into a plantation—transforms from a ‘haven’ into a ‘landscape of disease,’ where slavery and institutionalized oppression produce a deceptively verdant scene of economic prosperity that is at the same time a playground for the grotesque.

Examining the concept of cultural haunting from an expansive, hemispheric perspective, María del Pilar Blanco argues that writers ‘who share similar anxieties about a specific set of landscapes common to the experience of the Americas elucidate how we can establish readings of hemispheric similarities through the use of haunting’ (7). Blanco further argues that instead of reading the invocation of haunting as indicative of ‘past conundrums in search of closure’ we should perceive ‘these phenomena ... as experiments in a prolonged evocation of future anxieties and extended disquiet in multiple locations of the Americas’ (7). The implications of this hemispheric approach to the poetics of haunting is that it encourages an appreciation for what are sometimes key differences between people of disparate cultural backgrounds in relation to an often violently contested landscape. This method also encourages the recognition of lines of influence that fall outside of traditional (and artificial) national boundaries. Following Blanco’s Pan-American approach allows for a longer literary-historical timeline that reveals the deep origins of a Southern Gothic landscape that was, from the outset, marked by violence and racial oppression.

These origins can be traced to the various tragic narratives that emerged from the Spanish conquest of the southeastern portion of the North American continent. Accounts from New Spain far predate the conventionally agreed upon origin of the Gothic in Horace Walpole’s 1764 novel *The Castle of Otranto*, but these ostensibly true stories convey elements we now accept as firmly Southern Gothic. Racial violence, grotesque tortures, and a pervasive fear of a vengeful Other are the hallmarks of these texts, which become even more recognizably Gothic when we remember that they relate horrors that emerged from a dark mixture of religious dogma and greed. For example, Garcilaso de la Vega’s 1605 *The Florida of the Inca* relates the testimony of three survivors of De Soto’s failed expedition, and this history also includes a harrowing account

of the trials of the conquistador Juan Ortiz, whom De Soto's men found living in a Timacua Indian village in what is now present-day Florida. Ortiz had been captured by an especially cruel Cacique and made to endure a number of torments. One of the most significant of these occurs when the Cacique orders Ortiz to guard the tribe's burial ground from desecration by animals, a common problem because of the tribe's practice of placing their dead in 'wooden chests that served as sepulchers' (65–6). Armed with four hunting darts, Ortiz stands guard, but that night he falls asleep long enough for a panther to abscond with the corpse of a recently deceased child. Fearing that the tribe members will 'burn him alive' (66), Ortiz chases the panther into the dark forest where he manages to kill it with a lucky throw of a dart. This brief narrative contains a host of what have become Southern Gothic elements. There is the bewildered European, here Ortiz, who is 'haunted by the fear of death' (66) at the hands of a racial Other, and there is the ever-present, all-encompassing Florida landscape, in which Ortiz 'groped his way through the underbrush' to view 'in the light of the moon' the horror of a panther—an emissary of the wilderness itself—'feeding at its pleasure upon the remains of the child' (66).

As the signature landscape of the Southern Gothic tradition, the swamp, or bayou, enjoys a particularly strong hold on the literary imagination. The swamp seems custom made to evoke feelings of gloom and hopelessness. As early as 1791, the naturalist William Bartram promoted the southern swamp as a realm alternately marked by dangerous alligators and sublimely clear natural springs. But it was an even earlier text that first introduced English readers to the southern swamp as a landscape of melded beauty and danger: Captain John Smith's account of his capture and subsequent release by the Pamunkey Indians. Published in 1624, seventeen years after the presumed event, Smith's tale may owe some of its particulars to the Ortiz narrative, including the account of his life being spared thanks to the efforts of a chief's daughter (in

Smith's account, the famed Pocahontas) (Cabell 51–63). Smith's narrative is a compelling and at times bloody account of racial violence enacted within a Virginia marsh. He begins with an account of his party's attempt to reach the head of the Chickahominy River. Navigating the challenging landscape, the men make slow progress by felling the trees that block the passage of their barge. Determined to move forward, Smith, accompanied by two English companions and two Indian guides, attempts to make progress in a canoe. His small party eventually makes it to the swamp that serves as the river's head, but matters take a violent turn when they are attacked by the Pamunkey Indians. With his men slain, an injured Smith takes refuge when he immerses himself 'up to the middle in an oozy creek' where the Indians—leery of approaching a man who had just killed three of their warriors and wounded several others—waited until Smith, 'near dead with cold', surrendered (87). Realizing he must abandon the water to survive, Smith finally concedes defeat as much to the swamp as to the Pamunkey warriors. In Southern Gothic fashion, Smith's swamp is a landscape within which the European comes to blows with a subjugated racial Other.

Two centuries later, Louisiana writer, Henry Clay Lewis penned stories that represented an evolution of the Southern Gothic landscape as a battleground of oppression, while also invoking the idea of the swamp, in particular, as a locale for a problematic form of wilderness-linked liberation. While his contemporary and fellow southerner, Edgar Allan Poe, largely preferred ambiguous European scenes for his tales, Lewis embraced the swamp as a powerfully evocative setting. In analysing Lewis's portrayal of the Louisiana marshlands, Edward Watts writes, 'The bayous are neither land nor water: they are a constantly changing, darkening, and threatening bog. Moreover, these bayous had, before Lewis, never been described and explored as a literary device' (120).

A notable example is found in the story ‘A Struggle for Life,’ in Lewis’s *Odd Leaves from the Life of a Louisiana Swamp Doctor* (1850). As is the case with his other stories, Lewis’s signature character—the racist swamp doctor Madison Tensas—serves as a decidedly unreliable and at times downright detestable narrator. In the story, a dwarf slave is charged with guiding Tensas through the swamp so that the doctor may tend to the slave owner’s sick mother. As a form of pre-payment for leading him through the labyrinth of the swamp, Tensas gives the slave a drink of brandy, with the promise of more once they reach their destination. The drink proves too potent for the man, and soon Tensas realizes the drunken slave has gotten them lost. With the hope of finding their way out in the morning, an irate Tensas makes camp on a ridge above the swamp water. He fashions a makeshift bed out of cane leaves, and—in a gesture that demonstrates how the swamp environment reveals the humanity hidden behind his racism—he makes a bed for the inebriated slave as well, loaning him the use of his saddle blanket. Thus the swamp of this story functions as an obstacle to physical movement and as a facilitator of otherwise impossible social interaction. However, any good will between the men ends when the inebriated slave, demanding another drink, attacks Tensas and all but murders him. Thinking Tensas dead, the slave releases the narrator, takes his bottle of brandy, and then, in his drunkenness, accidentally immolates himself in the campfire. Tensas eventually rouses from his death-like state to find the dwarf slave’s charred corpse (146–51). It is a decidedly grotesque and sophisticated tale, one that Lewis sets entirely within the ambiguously hostile landscape of a Louisiana swamp. His selection of setting is more than just the promotion of an aesthetic; the swamp affords these men the sustained social interaction necessary for their animosity to explode into a literal fight. Also, because Tensas is alone with the slave, their swamp campsite is one of the rare places where a slave might have a chance of gaining the upper hand on a white

man. In the swamp, racial conventions so solidified elsewhere are malleable, even assailable. A wild landscape devoid of human settlement, the swamp exposes cracks in that fortified system of oppression.

For African American writers the swamp held a similar role as a threatening landscape that nevertheless offered a remote possibility of an escape—if only temporarily—from the horrors of slavery. The dense vegetation of the swamp coupled with its roadless, watery character made it easier for fugitives to disappear into its labyrinth of green and grey. Once absorbed into its damp security, slaves could better evade trackers and experience—for a fleeting, uncomfortable, and still dangerous moment—liberation from that most white-controlled of agricultural landscapes, the plantation. One of the best literary examples of how the swamp functions as a temporary refuge from the horrors of slavery is found in Harriet Jacobs's autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Unable to bear the continued abuses of her North Carolina slave master, Jacobs decides to flee. Fully aware that the Fugitive Slave Act makes any attempt to go north extremely dangerous, especially if she were to take her children, Jacobs's friends and family concoct a plan by which she will to hide in an exceedingly unlikely place, the garret of a shed attached to her grandmother's house. While her uncle makes the necessary preparations to the ceiling of the tiny shed (where, remarkably, she spent much of the following seven years of her life), other family members hide Jacobs in the nearby, and aptly named, Snaky Swamp.

Hiding in the swamp weighs heavily upon Jacobs's physical and mental health, but she views it as far preferable to the alternative. 'The heat of the swamp, the mosquitos, and the constant terror of snakes, had brought on a burning fever. ... when they came and told me it was time to go back to that horrid swamp, I could scarcely summon courage to rise. But even those

large, venomous snakes were less dreadful to my imagination than the white men in that community called civilized' (126). Jacobs calls her hiding place in the garret of her grandmother's shed her 'loophole of retreat,' (128) and just as this painfully small space in the ceiling of a shed allows her to evade a life of slavery, so too does the forbidding landscape of the swamp. Like the garret, the swamp—while fully inside the boundaries of the slaveholding South—exists beyond the notice of those who would re-insert her into that system. As Watts contends, the swamp is a landscape always at risk of succumbing to flood waters, the 'setting itself is thus quite subjective. The prospect of the land's eminent inaccessibility creates the ambiguous potential for its disappearance or isolation from all external influences' (123). It is this inaccessibility that allows the garret and Snaky Swamp to serve as 'loopholes of retreat.' Jacobs may hide in either, as long as she can endure their inhospitable natures, and as long as she remains unnoticed by those in power.

The Southern Gothic swamp became so fully developed as a cultural signifier during the nineteenth century that it served as a form of shorthand for the various miseries of the Southern experience, especially slavery. Swamps figure significantly in Charles Chesnutt's so-called 'conjure tales', which relate the horrors of slavery as told in dialect by Uncle Julius, a former slave. In Chesnutt's 1887 story, 'The Gophered Grapevine', Julius mentions a runaway slave who 'tuk ter de swamp' and whose Master 'en some er de yuther nabor w'ite folks had gone out wid dere guns en dere dogs fer ter he'p em hunt' for the man (38). Similar mentions of the swamp as a place of refuge occur in Chesnutt's 'The Conjuror's Revenge' and 'A Deep Sleeper.' Indeed, the swamp functions as the central landscape of Julius's tales. It is a realm of temporary relief from white domination, a place of healing through the procurement of medicinal plants, the secret meeting place of lovers, and, in 'Dave's Neckliss', the location of 'de plantation buryin'-

groun’’ (134). The swamp performs several of these functions in Chesnutt’s 1888 tale, ‘Po’ Sandy’, a story in which the titular slave asks his lover, Tenie (who happens to be a conjure woman), to magically transform him into something free from the misery of slavery, while also allowing him to stay on the plantation with her. They decide the best option is a tree. As Julius relates, ‘Tenie tuk ‘im down by der aidge er de swamp, not fur frum de quarters, en turnt ‘im inter a big pine tree’ (48). Tragically, while Tenie is away some men cut down Sandy’s tree, and, at the sawmill (which is also located near the swamp), they mill his tree-bound body into lumber. Since transforming him back into a man will mean his death, Tenie grieves for her lost Sandy, and his lumber is put into service over the years as the makings of various plantation-area buildings. While in this tale the swamp does not itself serve as a refuge, it is the location in which the tree-Sandy is rooted, where he—like the slave cabins that are also located in the bog—becomes a literal part of the bayou landscape.

The swamp features so largely in Chesnutt’s tales because it is where those in power place the less-desirable members of the plantation population. Chesnutt’s work demonstrates his understanding that the imagined landscapes of the South were ripe with Gothic implications. Like Lewis before him, Chesnutt recognized how the southern landscape becomes a foil for its characters at the same time that it works as an emblem for the social mire that encumbers their lives. No less than their northern counterparts did these Southern Gothic writers understand that by chaining the trauma of oppression (racial and otherwise) to the land, that trauma becomes intimately associated with the larger national mind. Anxieties that haunt the land haunt the culture, and as the nineteenth-century became the twentieth, other writers followed suit, employing the power of the Southern Gothic landscape to tell stories far exceeding their modest regional garb.

One late-nineteenth century writer in particular, Kate Chopin, utilized the southern landscape in a way that served as a prevailing, and sometimes key, component of her tales. Like those of Chesnut, her stories seem keenly aware of how the swamp represents an island of dreadful freedom. It becomes a place in which an oppressed figure (like Harriet Jacobs) might immerse herself in physical misery to momentarily shed an otherwise inescapable system of oppression. For instance, in Chopin's much-anthologized 1893 tale 'Désirée's Baby', Désirée—the young wife of Armand, a tyrannical plantation owner—gives birth to a child bearing the physical features of their slaves. Initially oblivious to the situation, Désirée (who is herself an orphan of uncertain parentage) finally notices the racial characteristics of her baby. She beseeches her husband: 'What does it mean?' Armand replies, 'It means ... that the child is not white, it means that you are not white' (192). Désirée's adoptive mother tells her to return home with her baby. Instead she makes one of the more powerful exits of Southern fiction, when, still in her dressing gown and slippers, she walks out of the house with her baby in her arms and, as Chopin writes, 'disappeared among the reeds and willows that grew thick along the banks of the deep, sluggish bayou; and she did not come back again' (194). Chopin's swamp is similar to those found in earlier Southern Gothic texts; it is an unpleasant option for those who have run out of options. Unable to stay within the hellish confines of her near-demonic husband's plantation—ironically named L'Abri ('the shelter')—and unwilling to return to the plantation of her adoptive parents, she embraces an unlikely third option: the bayou at the edge of the plantation boundary, a realm of certain death for herself and her child.

The work of Lewis, Chesnut, and Chopin presage William Faulkner's own Southern Gothic landscapes, but unlike his nineteenth-century predecessors, he took as his project the creation of a massive fictive universe: Yoknapatawpha County, a place populated by a wealth of

interconnected characters and events, where an epic story of community and family is interwoven into the larger tapestry of the South. Faulkner's landscapes often reveal a cyclical trauma, in which artefacts of injustice are buried, unearthed, mourned and reborn, so as to haunt humanity anew. In *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) he paints the legacy of human misery upon the land when he describes the squalor in which the town's black population resides. It is a landscape that absorbs the human condition, melding it with desperate people who seem ever doomed to live in poverty and oppression. In one passage, Dilsey, (the Compson family housekeeper) walks to church, and as she walks the narrator pans away to take in the passing scene: 'a broad flat dotted with small cabins whose weathered roofs were on a level with the crown of the road. They were set in small grassless plots littered with broken things, bricks, planks, crockery, things of a once utilitarian value' (291).

This landscape becomes a map of degradation. As the road nears the cabins where the blacks live, it transitions from pavement to dirt; the land drops on both sides until the shabby roofs are at the same level as the road. The people who live in these houses occupy a 'grassless' and eroding land, a scene that shares to some extent the looming demise Edward Watts argues is characteristic of Henry Clay Lewis's swamps (120, 123). The scene is littered with 'broken things', and perhaps nothing is quite so broken as the impoverished blacks who must survive there. In the racist calculus of the tale, the blacks, like the bits of 'bricks, planks, crockery, were also 'of a once utilitarian value', but are useful now only to the extent that they are willing to perform undesirable tasks and reside in an equally undesirable landscape. In the second half of the passage, Faulkner invokes the idea that the blacks and their blighted landscape share an intimate link. He writes that the area's trees form part of 'the foul desiccation which surrounded the houses' and would 'feed upon the rich and unmistakable smell of negroes in which they

grew' (291). In this landscape the plants metaphorically feed upon the people, an inversion both uncanny and grotesque.

In *Light in August* (1932), Faulkner combines set piece Gothic landscapes with an anxiety about the ways environmental degradation, here deforestation, serves as an indicator of a socially impoverished human community. At the opening of the novel he describes the aftermath of the timber industry at Doane's Mill: 'All the men in the village worked in the mill or for it. It was cutting pine. It had been there seven years and in seven more it would destroy all the timber within its reach' (4). The timber industry's impact remains apparent long after it has abandoned the area. It leaves behind a landscape of

gaunt, staring, motionless wheels rising from mounds of brick rubble and ragged weeds with a quality profoundly astonishing, and gutted boilers lifting their rusting and unsmoking stacks with an air stubborn, baffled and bemused upon a stump-pocked scene of profound and peaceful desolation, unplowed, untilled, gutting slowly into red and choked ravines beneath the long quiet rains of autumn and the galloping fury of vernal equinoxes. (4-5)

Environmental and human degradation ripple outward from the dead mill's epicentre. It creates a disfigured landscape of stumps and rusted machinery that mirrors the village's sullied and decayed community.

Even in those other of Faulkner's novels, in which we glimpse the forest before its degradation, we are nonetheless keenly aware of its impending doom. For example, in 'The Bear' section of *Go Down, Moses* (1942), he fashions something of a before and after image of the landscape of the Big Bottom, a lowland forest where young Ike McCaslin learns to hunt. This relatively unspoiled wilderness, owned by Major de Spain, is the home of a legendary bear,

nicknamed Old Ben. The preservation of this wetland seems to hinge upon the survival of the canny old bear, and—in one of the more sorrowful resolutions to any of Faulkner's stories—once Ben is finally killed, Major de Spain stops going on hunts and sells 'the timber-rights to a Memphis lumber company' (302).

The landscape does not always lose, and it is not always a beneficent or amoral entity. Take for example Flannery O'Connor's short story, 'A Good Man is Hard to Find' (1953), in which a band of escaped prisoners, led by an outlaw called 'The Misfit', come across a family whose car has run off a rural road into a wooded gulch. The Misfit chats with the distressed grandmother of the family as his henchmen lead the others beyond the 'dark edge' of the forest to be killed (128). Oddly enough, the landscape seems to react to the murders, even deriving satisfaction from the events. This subtle anthropomorphism emerges when the criminals lead Bailey, the grandmother's son, into the forest: 'There was a pistol shot from the woods, followed closely by another. Then silence. The old lady's head jerked around. She could hear the wind move through the tree tops like a long satisfied insuck of breath' (129). This response to Bailey's murder hints that the land is somehow more aligned with the outlaws than with their victims. After all, the gulch offers a convenient location for the crime, and as such facilitates the murders.

O'Connor's moral landscape might owe a debt to Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), in which (among several other events), a group of black field hands working in the Everglades refuse to heed the warning signs of an impending hurricane and suffer terribly as a result. Surveying the aftermath of the storm, the survivors 'Saw the hand of horror on everything. Houses without roofs, and roofs without houses. Steel and stone all crushed and crumbled like wood. The mother of malice had trifled with men' (169). Hurston, inspired by the actual Florida hurricanes of 1926 and 1928, creates a moment of environmental vengeance.

Much of the Everglades had suffered extreme environmental disturbance in the form of agricultural drainage. As Christopher Rieger argues, ‘Anthropomorphizing the lake locates power, agency, and divinity in nature as it reclaims this constructed pastoral site. As the lake bursts free, it converts the seemingly stable wall of man-made dikes into a fluid boundary, similarly reversing distinctions between life and death and collapsing distinctions between humans and animals’ (107). The storm’s power combines with humanity’s short-sighted agricultural practice, turning Lake Okeechobee into what Hurston calls a ‘monstropolous beast’ that ‘rushed on after his supposed-to-be conquerors’ (161–2). The hurricane ravages the human-altered landscape in such a way that the two become melded in catastrophe. The anthropogenic calamity of drainage and cultivation that erased the original Florida landscape is itself disastrously reshaped by an avenging hurricane. In a gesture akin to O’Connor’s sinister wood, Hurston’s hurricane-tossed Everglades landscape delights in breaking down dams, washing away houses, and drowning those who dared to fetter its natural course.

The fear that permeates the Southern Gothic landscape stems from the South’s long history of combining human oppression with environmental exploitation. The product of this melding is a particularly insidious amalgamation of cultural anxieties, one in which the landscape itself becomes a haunted house. Marie Liénard-Yeterian comments on this phenomenon in James Dickey’s novel *Deliverance* (1970). She argues that the map the men examine at the beginning of the book (before setting out on their doomed canoeing trip in rural Georgia) ‘looks like the architectural layout of a house’ and that the wild landscape ‘fascinates and terrorizes. It is unknown, threatening and threatened ... It connects to the past in its pristine aspect—to the days before human conquest and settlements. It is a place where you encounter the unexpected—where “accidents” happen. Going to the river, [is] like entering the haunted

house' (252). As the works of Ellen Glasgow, Eudora Welty, Zora Neale Hurston, William Faulkner, Harry Crews, Larry Brown, Daniel Woodrell, Karen Russell, and so many more make clear, the same may be said for a multitude of other Southern Gothic landscapes.

Writing about the South's history of racial oppression, Farah Jasmine Griffin asserts that the 'Southern earth is fertilized with the blood of black people. ... On the surface it is a land of great physical beauty and charm, but beneath it lay black blood and decayed black bodies. Beneath the charm lay the horror' (16). As the history and culture of the South indicates, this racism mingles with a host of other horrors so that, ultimately, the landscapes of the South are haunted by the threat of a shallowly buried cultural contagion, one that threatens to expose humanity's monstrous legacy and to spread that legacy from the past to the present. That is the great fear of the Southern landscape: that its pestilence will not merely frighten us with horrors exhumed from days gone by, but that even buried those horrors continue to poison the land, as well as those who reside within its influence.

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Further Readings

Blanco, María del Pilar. *Ghost-Watching American Modernity: Haunting, Landscape, and the Hemispheric Imagination*. New York: Fordham UP, 2012.

In this groundbreaking reconsideration of the concept of haunting in nineteenth- and twentieth-century American literature, Blanco argues that instances of spectrality should not be expected to conform to interpretations based upon a set of generic anxieties and desires. She argues that instead, these texts should be interpreted strictly within their specific cultural and spatiotemporal contexts.

Griffin, Farah Jasmine. *“Who Set You Flowin’?”: The African-American Migration Narrative*. New York: Oxford UP, 1995.

Griffin offers an impressively interdisciplinary reading of the African-American migration narrative, arguing that these texts, while often quite different from each other in many respects, nevertheless share a set of common tropes that reveal an influential political undercurrent inherent to these tales of the widespread movement of African-Americans from the South to the urban centres of the North.

Rieger, Christopher. *Clear-Cutting Eden: Ecology and the Pastoral in Southern Literature*. Tuscaloosa, AL: U of Alabama P, 2009.

Rieger investigates the question of how the South’s literature responded to the dramatic environmental changes of the 1930s and 40s. While he limits most of his analysis to four authors (Erskine Caldwell, William Faulkner, Zora Neale Hurston, and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings), the

book is nevertheless an insightful and historically informed look at the way the culture of the South changed in response to the anthropogenic reshaping of the land.

Watts, Edward. 'In the Midst of a Noisome Swamp: The Landscape of Henry Clay Lewis.'

Southern Literary Journal 22.2 (1990): 119–28.

Watts offers a thoughtful analysis of how Lewis, in his portrayals of the southern swamp, moved beyond the often static landscapes found in most tales of Old Southwest humour. Watts argues that Lewis's swamps, as characterized by a mixture of land and water exist in dynamic and threatening state that contributes to the 'creation of an organic and symbiotic link between setting and story' that would influence later writers such as William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor (102).

Yaeger, Patricia. *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930–1990*. U of Chicago P, 2002.

Yaeger focuses on a narrow selection of southern texts, but her observations, especially those about the role of trauma and the grotesque in the South's racial politics, are applicable well beyond the book's stated boundaries. Also illuminating is Yaeger's recognition of how the landscape (and even the dirt itself) functions as a troubled contact zone between the races.