11 Jan 2024: The backstory of Southern literature and theorizing a Southern mythology

Introduction

The South is a real place, with real history, economics, people, etc etc. But in an equally important, if not even more important, way, the South exists as a myth. What do I mean? What *is* myth?

- Ancient Greek distinctions between mythos and logos
- Myth may not be strictly factual (even when it is based in fact), but can it tell truths? Certainly, myths can do tell falsehoods, but its not the myth itself that is the falsehood.

What are Myths?

Myths are **cultural stories that allow peoples to understand their placedness within existence**, a means by which they can come to terms with ther own selves, wrestle with their desires and hopes, explore what they love, hate, and fear.

Myths give people a means by which to understand themselves and others, to see how the past, present, and future integrate *for them*. No one tells his own myths–these are just lies–but we all participate in any number of myths within our communities; these myths help to create and sustain community and to explore and explain the values, goals, and ideals of these communities.

Finally, myths are never static, but always evolving according to the changing circumstances of the communities. More than any other American place, the South is largely created by myths of its own making and those foisted upon it from without.

Background of the South and its Myths

"The South" as we think of it today has only existed for about 200 years; certainly, there were Southern states and, before these, Southern colonies, but prior to ~1820, there was no coherent entity called "the South". Yet, from the earliest days of European exploration, the South was a place of fantasy-projection and myth-making.

- 1539-42; Hernando de Soto explores what is now the South, from FL to AR. This South is a world of riches, beauty, and fantasy and de Soto's expedition is itself mythic in the various presentations of it, with reality and falsehood mixing with imperial propaganda and promotion of wealth-seeking, with factual reporting interacting with a sense of awe and wonder at this new world. Spain projected its fantasies onto the South, and Spanish fantasies became myths that inspired the French and English, and along the way

helped to create stories–like that of the Lady of Cofitachequi–still echo to our day.

- Eventually, by the end of the early days of the 17th century, the English had come to dominate the coast of North America north of Florida (extending all the way to Canada), calling all of it "Virginia" (at least initially). Sir Walter Raleigh's failed expeditions to what is now NC produced many more competing narratives of the South back in England.
- Back in England, the stories of success and failures brought back from "Virginia" inspired legends and tall tales, contributing to an expanding fantasy of the South, while, at the same time, undercutting parts of this fantasy. As "Virginia" became more centered on VA and the Carolinas, it was discussed as a place of Arcadian fantasy, commerce, and somewhere that men could get rich easily–at least that was the story. While there was truth contained in the myth, there was also an untruth: Virginia was hard and difficult.

Thomas Hariot and Early Southern Myths

Great English writers and poets of the early 1600s (including John Donne) wrote about Virginia, a place they had never seen, contributing to this fantasy. But it was an attempt to counter the harsh reality of VA life that led to the first truly significnat work of "Southern literature": Thomas Hariot's *A Briefe and True Report* (1588). - While not literature in any traditoinal sense (it is a promotional work), it does provide a story/perspective on Virgina–a "myth" if you will. - This is ultimatly a work of business boosterism and propaganda to contradict the bad image of Virginia being brough home by folks who been part of numberous failed attempts at colonization. So, while this isn't real literature, and while it has a primary purpose to convince English people to keep up the attempts at colonization, it is intriguing that, from the very beginning, th eSouth has existed as a fantasy–and engaging it has been participating in interrogating the veracity and realiability of this fantasy. - Thus, the South has, since hte 1580s, been a site of projection, onto which individuals look to find whatever it is they desire to find in it. When we place Hariot's book against the tales failed settlers were bringing back to England, we see a South the truth of which is contested, being debated, the stories about which are being told/retold, interpreted/reinterpreted. - Thus, from the begining, the South exists as a place of contention, a site of competing narratives: a palce in which myth will play a powerful role. We'll see this again and again this semester!

Jamestown and John Smith

The first permanent English settlement in the New World, and the beginning of the South as a place, was Jamestown in 1607. Jamestown also gave us our first Southern hero: Captain John Smith.

Smith was a man's man, a literal knight in shining armor who was also a

hard-nosed businessman. In many ways, Smith straddled the medieval and modern worlds, a tension that makes him useful for subsequent generations and a powerful image for especially the 19th century South. He was, in many ways, a character out of a storybook who seemed so familiar and yet so exotic, the living embodiment of chivalry, yet with a democratic streak, a head for business and profit, a propensity for hard partying, violence, and a love of the frontier and adventure, but who also had a poet's soul. He was thus in many ways a prototype of the "Southern gentleman", an ideal that remains with us unto this day.

Smith's own writings are a mix of Hariot's boosterism/propganda, adventure stories, meditations on the frontier, and futhering of his own legend. In 1624, he produces what is the first truly significant work of Southern literature, and in so doign posits himself as a prototype of the Southern hero, the Southern gentleman, and the Southern writer: charming, educated, adventuresome, violent, brave, artistic, profit-minded, chivalric, and self-aware. That work is *The Generall Historie of Virginia*. While the book looks some at all of British North America, it primarily focuses on Jamestown and its environs, as well as Smith's leadership of the Jamestown colony. The book's success meant that Smith would always and forever be associated with Virginia, even though he never understood himself as anything other than an Englishman.

Other Souths, Other Myths

Of course, Virginia does not represent all of the South, nor does Jamestown represent all of Virginia. The early 17th century sees the breaking off of Canada, New England, and the Midatlantic from the gigantic "Virginia", but Virginia is then itself subdivided into Virginia and Carolina, and then eventually Georgia, as well as a division into two Carolinas. Further, settlement moves inland as well. All of these developments lead to the next evolutions of Southern myths.

While Tidewater VA develops aristocratically, inland VA, and especially NC, develop with a more democratic ethos. SC, so long dominated by Charleston, develops aristocratically, but in a diferent way from Tidewater VA as Charelston, from its inception, has deep Caribbean connections and flavor, something we can still see to this day.

Thus, by the late 1600s, we are already faced with a powerful reality; before there was even a coherent entity called "South," there were already many "Souths":

- Coastal and inland
- aristocratic and democratic
- English and Caribbean

All this to say nothing of black slaves and white indentured servants, free whites, rich and poor, the farms (and later plantations) and the towns. This variety of Souths adds to the narrative complexity of the region at its genesis, of what it is and what it is not.

William Byrd of Westover, Chronicler of Southern Plurality

While the 17th and 18th century were largely devoid of literature in any real sense (some minor poets notwithstanding), there is at least one writer who explores the complex narrative of multiple Souths in detail: William Byrd II (of Westover). Byrd, a polymath (writer, lawyer, architect, surveyor) wrote widely, but his most representative and most famous work is his 1729 *The History of the Dividig Line*, an account of the exploration to establish the border between VA and NC. That book, which is sometimes quite cruel and nasty towards low-status whites, shows Byrd's keep eye for place and peoples, making it an invaluable resoruce for understanding what was slowly becoming "the South." The book's presentation of NC's poor white swamp and forest dwellers, alongside descriptions of interactions between those people, elite white Virginians leading the expedition, and the slaves who are doing so much of the hard labor, gives us an insight into the complex relationship of high-status Southern whites, low-status Southern whites, and enslaved Southern blacks.

Tthe focus on the South as a site of tension between "civilization" and "wilderness/frontier" is also present here, as well as an emphasis on Southern land and places and Southern folkways. The wilderness/civilization tension adds an important wrinkle to the idea of the South, one that only expands as settlement crosses the Appalachians. All of this makes this book significant for understanding how the South is presented and interpreted in subsequent decades.

Of course, no one person defines and shapes Virginia and the South as significantly as does Thomas Jefferson, and we thus begin our readings for the semester with him next time.