

Beata Zawadka. *Dis/Reputed Region: Transcoding the U.S. South*. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego, 2018, 194 pp., ISBN: 978-83-7972-178-8

DOI: 10.18290/rh216911-10

Dis/Reputed Region: Transcoding the U.S. South offers multifaceted and provocative analyses of cultural representations of the transcultural South. By deconstructing what constitutes the South's self-fashioning practices and multiple "incarnations", Beata Zawadka questions entrenched trends of seeing the South only through the prism of the external dynamics of the region. The book takes the myth of the South as a point of reference, which in itself for many scholars is a time-worn notion. Yet, even though some of the questions about the myth are familiar, the author finds some unfamiliar answers—her

study focuses on the South's myth-making skills, internal dynamics, and un/conscious performance of its "mythical" self.

Dis/Reputed Region is a multidisciplinary study of the transformation of the image of the American South as represented in selected films, novels, and television productions. The author approaches the South's transcultural identity from four different perspectives, which form the main theoretical axis of her work: theories of performance, serialization, adaptation, and tourism. Pushing the study of the South in this innovative direction, *Dis/Reputed Region* is an engaging critical intervention into Southern studies. Performance studies shed new light on two fundamental aspects of Southern identity—its in/stability and its dynamic cultural liminality. Serialization brilliantly demonstrates how the South rhythmically performs itself (leading to a standardized cultural image). The practice of adaptation points to the contested issues of authenticity and the alleged triviality of the region's cultural representations, while the studies of tourism draw attention to the South as a franchise. While some of those theoretical approaches are not new,¹ the collage of these theoretical perspectives yields illuminating observations. Apart from examining how the South realizes its transcultural potential using the aforementioned four theoretical standpoints, Zawadka also skillfully supplements her textual analysis with other theories—queer theory, psychiatry, economics, game theory, postcolonial theory, film theory, and literary studies—in order to explore how the American South re-constructs its own identity. Zawadka uses both external and internal processes of constructing regional identity to reinterpret the region in terms of transculturalism, to show that the South has "agency" through which it can manifest its identity, both within the US and in a global context.

"In Lieu of Introduction" is a poignant opening volley, in which Zawadka presents the hypothesis, research area and structure of the book. As befits an initial chapter and a point of departure for further analyses, the introduction brings together extensive discussions of the four theoretical approaches: performativity, serialization, adaptation and tourism. While these theories are adequately and convincingly explicated, the same, however, cannot be said about the notion of transculturality of the South. The short definition of the term "transculture" and "transculturalism" offered on page 15 is barely

¹ For instance, Karen Cox edited a volume which analyzed the South through the prism of tourism studies: *Destination Dixie: Tourism & Southern History*. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2012. See also: Stanonis, Anthony J., *Dixie Emporium: Tourism, Foodways, and Consumer Culture in the American South*. U of Georgia P, 2008.

adequate. Zawadka's arguments about the South's transculturality (the region not as a local phenomenon, but rather a social imaginary which is part of a trans-cultural flow of concepts, myths and ideas about the region) would be more powerful if she had supported her discussions with more references to sources that define the concept of transculturality.²

The first chapter, entitled "The South as Masquerade", offers an intriguing analysis of the South as a "transvestite". The South is often represented, not only in local but also global imagination, as Dixie, a female figure—thus the region is traditionally endowed with feminine qualities. Referring to the casting of the patriarchal South as "Dixie" and more narrowly to the traditionally melodramatic "Steel Magnolia" mask of Dixie (36), Zawadka proposes a daring interpretation to see the South not in terms of gender, but rather in terms of drag performance. Hence, she analyzes the region's theatrical potential to "dress up" as a woman. In order to demystify this cultural encoding of the patriarchal Dixie through its drag practice she adopts the melodramatic-performative lens of Gilles Deleuze, Antonin Artaud and Linda Williams to analyze *Steel Magnolias* by Robert Harling (the 1987 theoretical play) as well as its two filmic adaptations, namely *Steel Magnolias* by Herbert Ross (1989) and *Steel Magnolias* by African-American director, Kenny Leon (2012); the film *Julie & Julia* by Nora Ephron (2009, which is an adaptation of Julia Powell's blog *Julie & Julia: My Year of Cooking Dangerously*, 2005), Julia Child's autobiography *My Life in France* (2006) and the CW show *Hart of Dixie* (produced by Leila Gerstein, 2011–2014). While her breadth of expertise in this area of research is as expansive as her intentions (we find references to Bollywood, camp, the male gaze, and the Stanislavski method), the chapter would benefit from a more nuanced analysis of *Heart of Dixie* and a more convincing grounding of *Julie & Julia* in Southern discourse.

In the second chapter, "The South as Serial", Zawadka looks at the trans-coded stagings of the gothic Dixie. The author demonstrates the region's transcultural potential through the gothic spaces in such post-network TV shows as *True Blood* (2008–14, HBO, by Alan Ball), *True Detective* (season one, HBO, 2014 by Nic Pizzolatto) and *American Horror Story* (Season 3: "Coven", 2013–14; and season 4: "Freak Show", 2014–15). The world-wide popularity of the analyzed series underscores the fact that the South, because of its gothic proclivity, is becoming a transcultural phenomenon (the region transgresses the limits of the local to become a global phenomenon). Rather

² For instance, Madeleine Herren, Martin Rüesch, and Christiane Sibille. *Transcultural History: Theories, Methods, Sources*. Springer-Verlag, Berlin Heidelberg, 2012.

than analyzing the televisual (serial) representations of southernness,³ Zawadka explores “how serialization, the practice that hinges on deferring the moment of narrative closure, can act as a culture’s performance” (70). The ever-growing interest in how mass culture (TV series) represents the “Othered” region is not her concern. She explores how the South culturally reconfigures or “stages itself” through serialization, and how this serialization allows the South to consciously re-create itself as a liminal space (giving voice to the Other). Zawadka manifests copious knowledge of gothic conventions, the South as the Other, and the neo-pastoral Other, while writing a thoroughly understandable chapter about southern serialized gothicism. The notions of serialization and adaptation are interlaced in the argumentation, and the issue of adaptation naturally segues into the next chapter but the divergence between those concepts should be more carefully stressed in argumentation.

In “The South as Adaptation”, the third chapter, Zawadka turns her attention to culturally discredited filmic texts of the American South. This chapter is a fresh contribution to Southern and adaptation studies that brings these disciplines into a dialogue. After Kamilla Elliott Zawadka adopts a pluralist approach to adaptation and uses Elliott’s “reciprocal transformative model” to question the alleged triviality of popular adaptations of Southern culture. She begins her analysis with an assumption that the repetitive appropriation of the South on the big screen leads to a trivialization of the region’s image. This practice of “Southsploitation”—adapting Dixie to fit the preferences of global audiences for the “trite” Dixie—trivializes the South as the nation’s “freak show”. Looking at reductionist modifications of the region, Zawadka reminds us that value can be found in movies which have received mixed reviews. *The Birth of the Nation* (1915; D. W. Griffith), *The Tarnished Angels* (1957, Douglas Sirk) and *Hairspray* (2007, Adam Shankman) have all been on the one hand hailed as groundbreaking and on the other criticized for trivializing the literary/filmic original in the process of adaptation.⁴ The use of the metaphor of “cultural schizophrenia” in connection with adaptations yields significant recognitions and enlightening readings, proving that the dis/reputed adaptations testify to the region’s power to creatively reproduce itself and globally “rebrand” southernness.

³ *Small-Screen Souths: Region, Identity, and the Cultural Politics of Television*, edited by Lisa Hinrichsen, Stephanie Rountree, and Gina Caison (LSU 2017) is the first systematized and in-depth book-length analysis of representations of the South in television series.

⁴ The respective literary and filmic original texts are: *The Trilogy of Reconstruction* by Thomas Dixon (1902, 1905), *Pylon* by William Faulkner (1935), and *Hairspray* by John Waters (1988).

The theme of transcultural adaptations continues through to the final chapter, “The South as Heterocosm.” Employing Linda Hutcheon’s definition of the term heterocosm, Zawadka claims that the South is a transcultural storytelling franchise/industry. She proves her hypothesis of the global adaptability of the South by examining the first truly global Southern phenomenon—Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind* (1936)—as a franchise expressing nostalgia for the pastoral vision of the South. Zawadka situates this, the best known cultural embodiment of the pastoral American South, across an impressive range of twentieth-century literary sequels and transmedia adaptations of the novel: American novels (Alexandra Ripley’s *Scarlett*, Alex Hailey’s *Roots*, Alice Randall’s *The Wind Done Gone*, Donald McCaig’s *Rhett Butler’s People* and *Ruth’s Journey*), French novels (Regine Deforges’ *The Blue Bicycle*, Julien Green’s *The Distant Lands*), film *Gone With the Wind* (dir. Victor Fleming, 1939), two American TV series *Scarlett* (1994) and *Roots* (1977), and a Polish TV series *Noce i dnie* (*Nights and Days*, 1978). She adeptly weaves interconnected pastoral “rebrandings” into the larger regional and national narratives. Zawadka is a fine explicator, broad sweeps are her *métier*. However, the argumentation in this chapter is less effective when she attempts to analyze the *Gone with the Wind* industry (productions and performances) as an affective-expressive phenomenon. The author’s argument throughout the book is threaded seamlessly through a multidisciplinary theoretical background but this cannot be said about the last analytical chapter. Although the use of video game theories as an analytical tool lends interdisciplinary relevance to the texts chosen for analysis in this chapter, the use of some concepts and notions from the theory of video games seems to be arbitrarily imposed upon the analyzed texts.⁵

The book closes with a short but excellent interpretation of *The Bloodline* series (Netflix 2015–16), which ties together all the aforementioned theories and analytical paths. Zawadka yet again successfully redirects our attention to performativity and tourism (the “tourist-at-home” staging of the region) and serialization—the replacement of a standardized cultural image of a pastoral, sunny Floridian landscape by noir (or gothic).

Dis/Reputed Region: Transcoding the U.S. South points to new directions in Southern studies through its engagement in innovative areas (performance

⁵ The frequent use of some notions and concepts connected with gaming (the southern pastoral as a transcultural and democratic game, Dixie’s “gameplay”, the “gamey” southern pastoral plot, Rhett Butler as gamer) instead of clearly explicating the region’s agency in contemporary global culture creates an impression of forced connections with video game interactivity.

studies, TV studies). The variety of topics and theoretical approaches adds “depth and complexity [... to] Dixie’s pop-cultural performances” (149). However, the layering of theoretical perspectives and juggling of concepts from unrelated theories render the book hard to digest for those who have not achieved the author’s level of mastery. Thus, the theoretical density is both a strength and weakness of the book, since a non-expert may get lost in the multitude of evidence. Additionally, Zawadka’s aim is to explore the region’s ambiguities and internal contradictions. This she achieves not only on an interpretative level, but also through a tactical deployment of lexical ambiguity—through signs such as dashes, slashes, inverted commas and parenthesis. However, the accumulation of such markers of ambiguity—as for instance in the words “(a)e(s)th(et)ic(al)” and “s/o(u)ther/n”—may confuse readers uninitiated in this peculiarity of performative style and hamper understanding. Furthermore, the explanation behind choosing particular texts for analysis also seems insufficient. Zawadka did not explain how she curbed the scope of material for the analysis. A decision to leave out texts solely on the grounds of a given text’s dis/reputation and ambiguous critical reception (p. 34) does not explain much.

All in all, Zawadka’s exploration of the South is unusually rich, complex and versatile. The South has been examined from a range of theoretical standpoints, via a number of interesting angles and voices. It covers a great deal of ground and gives readers a broad taste of the field, pointing towards many directions for future exploration. By bringing transcultural heterogeneity into her analysis of the American South, she raises important questions relating to the South’s (self-)representation in popular culture. Indeed, the book more than satisfies its aims, opening up further avenues for multi-disciplinary research.

*Urszula Niewiadomska-Flis, PhD, D. Litt., Associate Professor at KUL
The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin
Institute of Literary Studies
Department of American Literature and Culture
e-mail: urszula.niewiadomska-flis@kul.pl
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0840-6497>*