

THE (UN)POPULAR SOUTH

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INTRODUCTION: SOUTHERN (UN)POPULARITIES

MARCEL ARBEIT

ABSTRACT: Popularity or unpopularity always depends on reception, and one easily turns into the other. Myths and idealizations of the South did contribute to its popularity, but terrible events, despicable practices, and unjust stereotypes did an even better job. In the course of its history, it has been primarily the unpopular which has made the South popular—slavery, the Civil War, segregation, racism, etc. A related topic is the real or seeming unpopularity of southern authors in and outside the South. Southern writers may write about the Souths they are familiar with, but, to be recognized, they are pressed to step out of their regions—Edgar Allan Poe, William Faulkner, Fred Chappell, Harry Crews, and Richard Ford became popular in Europe long before winning their deserved reputations at home. Many scholars see the South as full of fakes and some even challenge the very existence of a contemporary South, speaking about “post-southern America.” Genre literature is a handy tool for the rendering of this “post-southern South”: popular genres such as horror, the crime novel, or fantasy are used to point out various unpopular aspects of contemporary southern life.

KEYWORDS: southern literature; southern culture; genre literature; unpopular topics; southern anthologies; post-southern America

1 ASPECTS OF (UN)POPULARITIES

Recent discussions on the South very often take a polemical form. Is the present-day South authentic, or not authentic; modern, or postmodern; desirable, or undesirable; homogeneous, or heterogeneous? And is there a South at all? Is the region, traditionally designed as “the South,” either or alternatively non-South, post-South, or anti-South? Participants in the current scholarly disputes summon to their aid cultural theorists, philosophers, sociologists, and historians, many of them never interested in the South, and they come up with a multiplicity of answers that, surprisingly, do not so much contradict as complement each other. Whatever point of view we adopt, the South is a fluid term, but all the elusive attempts at its grasping are not futile, as they contribute to a better understanding not only of the region but also, in