In a 1990 essay, Cornel West identifies a key shift in U.S. cultural politics since the 1960s, the era widely termed “postmodern,” arguing that the “new cultural politics of difference” is distinguished by its emphasis on particularity and diversity as part of a reaction against the universalizing bent of modern politics (19). Drawing on West, Edward Soja and Barbara Hooper assert, in “The Spaces That Difference Makes” (1993, 184), that the emphasis on locally based micropolitics is a defining feature of the postmodern turn in U.S. culture, and that a renewed focus on spatiality is central to this politics. The postmodern emphasis on space is intended to highlight the situated nature of all political knowledge and action, and to disavow the view from nowhere—the global and disembedded claims of modern knowledge and politics. It is not surprising that postmodern cultural politics takes space rather than time as the dimension within which social differences can be made visible and active, given that the self-definition of European modernity has monopolized time, subsuming varied histories into a singular and teleological narrative of History. The hitherto underprivileged category of space offers a way of interrupting modernity’s global march as well as of restoring the divergent histories that have contributed to the modern legacy.

The renewed interest in the regional specificity of the U.S. South in recent years offers an instance of this kind of spatialized cultural politics of difference. Since the mid-1970s, U.S. historians, sociologists, novelists, literary critics, and cultural commentators seem to have become obsessed with the South, reviving the enduring debate about what makes the region distinct from the rest of the nation. In this essay, I examine the turn south...
in U.S. postmodern culture as a distinct response to recent processes of economic and political modernization that are dramatically transforming the region. Using southern regionalism as a test case, I also attempt to draw out the political implications of the spatialized cultural politics of difference said to be distinctive of the postmodern era.

As West and Soja and Hooper suggest, one of the defining features of postmodern culture is its thoroughgoing critique of socioeconomic processes of modernization as well as universalizing ideologies of modernity. Accordingly, movements to establish southern difference typically construct the region as a premodern or not quite fully modern space that can ground social and cultural critiques of modernity. One reason the South can function in this way is that it has remained more rural and less thoroughly industrialized than the rest of the nation for most of its history. The region’s status as a hinterland left behind by uneven national processes of modernization bolsters contemporary claims that the South constitutes an “elsewhere” to a fully globalized capitalist system. In all instances of southern regionalism, across various disciplines, the South is represented as a nucleus of certain values that are pitted against modern existence: localism or rootedness in place, close-knit racial communities, face-to-face forms of social interaction, and folk-cultural traditions.

This cluster of values is clearly displayed in *Why the South Will Survive*, a collection of essays by “Fifteen Southerners” published in 1981. Asserting that the South has special lessons to teach a nation caught up in a giddy pursuit of material progress, most of the contributors portray the region as a place of refuge from the alienating and fragmenting conditions of modern U.S. life. In order to function in this way, the South must be characterized as a primarily rural region. William Havard (1981, 39) thus argues that, because the South was “arrested in a preindustrial state for the greater part of America’s century of ‘modern development,’” it has managed to preserve unique traits that may prove greatly valuable to a nation hurtling into a “postindustrial” era. Havard identifies these regional traits as a strong sense of place and history, emphasis on family and local community, and preference for “face to face” over abstract and contractual social relations (41).

Accounts of southern cultural difference typically highlight localism and face-to-face communal orientation as the main features that set the region apart from the rest of the nation. These are the two features broadly perceived to be most seriously at risk today, when all locales and social relations are more thoroughly imbricated than ever before in a global economic
order that can only be known as an abstraction. As one of the most passionate advocates of southern regionalism, John Shelton Reed (1981, 21), acknowledges, the southern values of localism and community are those typical of any “folk,” “peasant,” or “pre-modern” society with a “traditional value orientation,” and are bound to be menaced by the processes of urbanization and industrial development. For the South to operate as an Archimedean lever for social critique, it must be discursively constructed as a zone of arrested social and economic development.

This sort of construction of the South—as a residual rural space—can only be maintained at a discursive level, for exactly contemporaneous with culturalist assertions of southern regional specificity is the dissipation of material distinctions between the South and the rest of the nation. Economic studies of the South concur that since the mid-1970s virtually all economic indicators reveal a closing of the gap between the South and other regions of the country. Southern industrial development took off during the 1970s, aided by industrial decline in the Northeast and the Midwest, which spurred relocation of manufacturing to the South. Private capital was lured south by the promise of abundant natural resources, tax subsidies, cheap labor, and weak labor unions (Cobb 1984; Kasarda, Hughes, and Irwin 1991; Weinstein and Firestone 1978). James Cobb’s studies of the industrialization of the South provide an important corrective to the tendency, in accounts of southern distinctiveness, to hinge cultural value on economic underdevelopment. If the regionalists claim that southern backwardness in material matters translates into an antimaterialist cultural posture, Cobb (1984, 67) shows, to the contrary, that during the 1970s the “South found that its heritage of underdevelopment had suddenly become beneficial.” Precisely because of its relative underdevelopment, the South, like many parts of the third world, became a profitable new site for industrial relocation and capital investment.

The southern economic boom of the 1970s hastened the region’s convergence with the rest of the nation, stoking all kinds of anxieties about “the Americanization of Dixie,” to borrow from the title of John Egerton’s (1974) well-known book. If claims of southern cultural distinctiveness typically rest on rural grounds, such claims became untenable by the end of the 1970s, by which time patterns of urbanization in the South had fallen in line with the rest of the nation. By 1980, two-thirds of the southern population lived in metropolitan areas, which had been the prime beneficiaries of the industrial boom. Not only did the South’s rapid urbanization compromise its agrarian-based cultural identity, but the very forms of southern urban
development had begun to replicate northern trends of suburban sprawl and inner-city decay, further diminishing the South’s capacity to function as an elsewhere to contemporary urban existence (Boles 1995, 547–49; Miller 1988, 1–20; Larsen 1990, 140–59). In his lament for a disappearing Southern culture, Egerton (1974) equates “Americanization” with urbanization (73), which in turn he associates with a “steady erosion of the sense of place, of community, of belonging” (xx). Admitting that “the South is just about over as a separate and distinct place” (xxi), Egerton notes that the Americanization of Dixie is most visibly apparent in the urban centers of the South (109). Numerous other observers also have noted the dramatic transformations of southern landscape, architecture, and culture since the 1970s, pointing to the increased presence of shopping malls, apartment complexes, and skyscrapers as disturbing evidence of the standardization of the South (Grantham 1994, 262; Hobson 1981, 46).

Of course, it is no accident that a resurgent regionalism celebrating the distinct folk culture of the South has emerged precisely as the South is becoming a fully industrialized and urban region. Accelerated economic changes, of the modernizing kind that have occurred in the South since the 1970s, often spark reactive quests to conserve cultural values associated with an older way of life. As Immanuel Wallerstein (1988, 12) has pointed out, movements affirming cultural difference usually accompany the integration of peripheral regions into the capitalist world-system: “Many ‘cultures’ will be born or renewed in the decades ahead. The growing worldwide attacks on the capitalist system include attacks on the ‘universalist’ system of values which is used to sustain it. This encourages thereby the reassertion of ‘particularisms.’” Accordingly, the idea of a culturally distinct South was “created as a mental construct only a short time before it was historically eliminated as a material construct” (11).

David Harvey (1990) takes a much harsher stance than does Wallerstein toward the regional cultural politics that have mushroomed in recent years. Although Harvey is not concerned with the U.S. South in particular, he argues, like Wallerstein, that the global scale of capitalist reorganization since the 1970s has spawned cultural movements seeking to preserve the specificity of locale. The latest round of economic modernization has severely disrupted people’s experience of place; as all places are subsumed within a global economic order, no place can be understood intrinsically, immediately, or in purely local terms. Reacting to this increasing abstraction of space, cultural politics in the postmodern era are marked by regional resistances, or efforts to conserve values said to be rooted in
Harvey is critical of this spatial turn in contemporary cultural politics because its quest for cultural conservation can all too easily veer into political conservatism. Nostalgic celebrations of old ways of life being swept away by economic modernization often enshrine traditions that supported deeply inequitable social orders, while emphasis on localism tends to breed cultural insularity and ethnic chauvinism (Harvey 1990, pt. 3).

Harvey’s worries about the regional revivals of the postmodern era are well justified in the specific case of U.S. southern projects of cultural reclamation. The social and political conservatism implicit in most accounts of southern distinctiveness is made explicit in historian Eugene Genovese’s (1994) brief for maintaining the cultural traditions of the Old South. Genovese’s defense of the South follows the predictable track, pitting southern localism and community values against the increasing abstraction of social relations characteristic of the era of multinational capitalism. Genovese makes his case for localism in the context of “worldwide economic integration that is taking place under the aegis of multinational corporate conglomerations” (98). This process of global economic integration was certainly transforming the U.S. South in particularly dramatic ways during the 1970s, by which time the region claimed at least half of all foreign capital investment in the United States. A consequence of this process is “cosmopolitanism,” which Genovese fears is eradicating local communities and standards of cultural value (98). Among the factors that have contributed to the new cosmopolitanism of the South is the recent influx to Southern cities of immigrants from Asia and Latin America, spurred by economic expansion (Kasarda, Hughes, and Irwin 1991, 62–67). The increased presence of these racial minorities in the Sunbelt is radically changing southern urban politics. In contrast to the earlier southern political model based on a rigid biracial caste system and supported by violence, southern cities since the economic boom of the 1970s have begun to switch over to a northern model of competitive multiethnic politics (Baylor 1988, 127–42). Once we specify the bases and effects of contemporary southern cosmopolitanism, and grant that the “one provincialism . . . most characteristic of the South is race” (Preston 1991, 189), Genovese’s argument for localism cannot but appear as a call for preserving the racial order of the Old South.

Genovese is quite frank about the fact that what he is defending is southern “conservatism,” but he seeks to elude its more disquieting ramifications in two ways. First, Genovese (1994, xi) simply asserts that white racial supremacy is not inherent to southern conservatism, leaving
readers to conclude that it is merely by accident that the social order of the South has historically required the economic exploitation, political exclusion, and social repression of its African-American population. Second, Genovese claims kinship between his politics and broadly leftist ones on the grounds that southern conservatism has always supported a powerful critique of advanced capitalism (31, 34). But the stories of racism and capitalism in the South are far more tangled than is suggested by Genovese’s account. The dismantling of legalized racial segregation in the South both cleared the way for the economic modernization of the region and was in turn facilitated by advocates of economic development. As various scholars have pointed out, business leaders in southern cities often functioned as “the advance agents of peaceful desegregation” (Cobb 1984, 112). Modernizing economic elites sought to distance themselves from traditionalists on racial matters and to promote the image of a region eager to relinquish its conservative racial past in the interests of economic growth (Luebke 1991, 236–53).

To acknowledge that racial desegregation and economic expansion occurred in tandem in the South is by no means to suggest that the processes of capitalist modernization inevitably produce social changes of a progressive sort and usher in a more equitable racial order. Scholarship on the southern economic boom provides overwhelming evidence to the contrary, demonstrating that the economic modernization of the South since the 1970s has been highly uneven and has in fact bypassed the majority of African Americans living in the South. Many of the industrial firms relocating to the South during its boom period simply avoided “Black Belt” areas of concentrated African-American residence, and the expanded labor markets of the Sunbelt developed along racially segmented lines, with African Americans concentrated in the lowest-wage occupations (Bullard 1989, 7–15; Cobb 1984, 85–86; Lyson 1989, 148–50). Capitalist modernization of the South has obviously not eliminated racial inequality, and the demise of de jure racial segregation did not occur as a logical consequence of structural economic changes but was forced by a political movement for civil rights.

Without subscribing to the view that capitalist development is inherently socially progressive, it is important to note that relatively progressive positions on racial desegregation became expedient for proponents of economic modernization in the South of the 1960s and 1970s. The forces of economic and racial conservatism have been clearly aligned in the South,
with traditionalists who oppose economic modernization explicitly defending a racist social order. Take as an example Fred Hobson’s (1981) critique of the rapid economic development of Atlanta during the Civil Rights movement and the decades immediately following. Business boosters and the city administration sought to project an image of Atlanta as the “city too busy to hate,” one unwilling to allow racial conservatism to impede its quest for economic growth. Hobson condemns Atlanta for selling its soul to business, giving up racism for “purely economic” and “utilitarian” reasons rather than moral ones, and actually asserts that “for all its cruelty and inhumanity, racism possessed a certain integrity, a commitment, however distorted and twisted. It would never sell out” (49).

Contrary to Genovese’s unargued claims, then, racism is integral to the U.S. southern tradition, and the “integrity” of this tradition can only be maintained by preserving the old racial order of the South. Racism has historically formed the core of the Southern mystique, and in fact most of the elements said to define a uniquely southern tradition are inextricably tied up with the conservation of white racial privilege. Take, for example, Genovese’s affirmation of southern antistatism or Havard’s emphasis on face-to-face rather than abstract and legal social relations as distinctive of southern culture. Southerners have often contrasted the racial order of their region to the more abstract racism of the urban North and justified it precisely for its face-to-face quality, which presumably gave southern racism a more warm and intimate countenance than its northern counterpart. Nostalgic celebration of organic, face-to-face communities is a common reaction to the increasing abstraction of social relations in modern times, and, in the case of southern regionalism, has decidedly conservative political ramifications. Social justice cannot always be immanently derived from concrete, face-to-face relations and often requires mediation by abstract political principles as well as extralocal adjudication: in the case of the South during the Civil Rights era, federal legal and military intervention was required to secure racial desegregation and black enfranchisement.

Crucial to the evaporation of the southern mystique in the post–Civil Rights era was the fact that racism could no longer be considered a solely southern problem. By the mid-1970s, for the first time in the history of the South, incoming African Americans began to outnumber those departing the region. This reverse black migration was widely cited as proof that “racism no longer defines the Dixie difference” (Boles 1995, 584). The migration of African Americans to the South from the mid-1970s onward
was spurred primarily by economic decline in the Rustbelt and by transformed economic and political conditions in the South following the Civil Rights movement and the industrial boom. Social science scholarship on the migration clearly documents that it was directed mainly to metropolitan areas of the South, where expanded electoral and political power as well as enhanced employment opportunities could be more fully accessed by African Americans than in the rural regions (Goldfield 1990, 221, 244–45; Preston 1991, 190).

However, culturalist accounts of the reverse migration tell an entirely different story. For example, anthropologist Carol Stack, in her book about the black southern migration tellingly titled *Call to Home* (1996), presents an interpretation that flouts all available evidence indicating that it is changed social, political, and economic conditions that are fueling the migration. According to Stack, African Americans are returning to rural and largely segregated areas in the South that the federal government characterizes as counties of “persistent poverty” (xv). Stack argues that cultural rather than economic factors are driving the migration, which she describes as an effort to “redeem a lost community” (xv). Stack’s representation of the rural South quite closely mirrors that of the regionalists discussed above in that she, too, polarizes the rural South against modern and postmodern urban life. Stack claims that, by returning to “homeplaces” in the rural South, African-American migrants are turning their backs to a “postmodern world” typified by a pervasive experience of “rootlessness” (197). These “homeplaces” are distant from big cities and Sunbelt industry, linked to traditional southern cash crops, with majority black populations, and with income levels far below national averages (19). Stack’s ethnographic research for her study was focused on the rural Carolinas, and her conclusions based on this area cannot be taken as representative of patterns of black reverse migration, which has been predominantly directed at urban areas with booming industrial economies. Like the southern regionalists, Stack can only sustain her image of the South as a refuge from urban modernity by constructing it as a rural and economically backward region mired in poverty.

The actual migration of African Americans to the South has been exactly concurrent with the black literary turn south since the 1970s. This development may initially seem puzzling because, as Farah Griffin (1995, 145–46) observes in her study of black migration narratives, it reverses the geographical direction (from south to north) established in African-American literature over the course of the twentieth century. The South in
this tradition has long been represented as “the scene of the crime” (Jones 1963, 95), a site of racial horror and brutality. But following the region’s political transformation in the wake of the Civil Rights movement, African-American literature began its migration south. This literary turn has been manifested at various levels—in the academic reclamation of Zora Neale Hurston’s southern folk aesthetics, which began during the mid-1970s; in essays and fiction by novelists such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Ntozake Shange, and Gloria Naylor; in the criticism surrounding this fiction, which consolidates the idea of a uniquely black folk tradition rooted in the rural South; and in a spate of memoirs and travel narratives about the South of a bygone age.

The reclamation of the South in African-American literary studies overlaps with Stack’s account in several key respects, not least in its portrayal of the South as the place where a lost racial community can be redeemed. For example, Alice Walker declares, in a much-quoted passage from her essay, “The Black Writer and the Southern Experience” (1984, 17), that “what the black writer inherits as a natural right is a sense of community. Something simple but surprisingly hard, especially these days, to come by.” If community is surprisingly hard to come by these days, especially in modern urban settings where community can only be imagined through the difficult work of mediation and abstraction, the rural South furnishes community as the African-American writer’s “natural right.” Like Carol Stack’s migrants, recent African-American literary-critical works are returning “South to a very old place,” to borrow the title of Albert Murray’s (1971) southern travelogue—to a putatively premodern, rural, and racially segregated South predating the economic and political transformations of the 1960s and 1970s. Toni Morrison (1993, 370–71), for example, characterizes African Americans as an essentially rural people, referring to the black community as “my people, we ‘peasants.’” Equating “community values” with “village values” (Morrison 1981, 38), Morrison curiously claims to write “village literature, fiction that is really for the village, for the tribe. Peasant literature for my people” (Morrison 1993, 370). Aside from the fact that Morrison’s novels circulate quite profitably within global metropolitan markets, her desired literary constituency, which she describes as a peasant people, was largely settled in metropolitan areas even in the South by the 1970s (Goldfield 1990, 203). Terms such as “village” or “peasant” literature shift the scene of African-American writing away from the modern metropolitan conditions that form its inescapable context, and in so doing, begin to clarify the cultural ambitions that are staked in the southern folk
aesthetic, best captured by Morrison’s (1984a, 389) statement that she wishes to write a “literature that is irrevocably, indisputably Black.”

Morrison has remarked that her first three novels are set in “closed, back worlds” (much like the homeplaces Stack describes as being left behind by twentieth-century life), and that even though *Song of Solomon* goes up to 1963, “it’s sort of back there somewhere” (in Taylor-Guthrie 1994, 110). The novel’s evocation of a rural and racially segregated southern past supports its “quest for roots.” Morrison explains that black cultural tradition exists “in a kind of village lore” that is vigorously sustained over time because “an ethnic group that is culturally coherent and has not joined the larger mainstream keeps very much intact for survival. The consequences of the political thrust to share in the economy and power of the country were to disperse that” (ibid.). The Old South is a logical destination for Morrison’s quest for roots because here a distinct black folk culture developed in relative isolation from the national mainstream as a result of legalized racial segregation and systematic exclusion from economic power. This racially specific culture would necessarily be put at risk by political moves toward racial integration and participation in national economic life. Consequently, Morrison cannot take as her fictional setting the rapidly urbanizing and industrializing South of the post–Civil Rights decades; the return to conditions of racial segregation and economic marginalization is essential to the recovery of discrete black cultural traditions and communities.

The links between black cultural community, poverty, and racial segregation are reiterated by most of the key contributors to southern folk aesthetics. Houston Baker Jr. (1991), for example, describes the “Old South”—or the South of the era of racial segregation—as the site of an authentically black folk tradition. Baker opposes to the “mulattoization” of black urban northern culture (35) “a field of ‘particular’ or vernacular imagery unique to the Afro-American imagination” (61), a field he situates squarely in the rural South of the past (30). Throughout his study, Baker asserts an inverse relation between the value of black southern culture, on the one hand, and economic and political power, on the other. African-American folk culture in the South operates at what Baker calls a “meta” rather than a “material” level: southern blacks developed a rich and resourceful cultural tradition as a direct consequence of their exclusion from political and economic power (38). Baker presents the northern urban migration as an aesthetic compromise that follows from racial integration. By his account, as by Morrison’s, the affirmation of integral black cultural
traditions seems contingent on the foreclosure of material opportunities for African Americans.

Even one of the most prominent advocates of the self-avowedly politicized Black Aesthetic movement of the 1960s, Addison Gayle (1992), has recently endorsed the literary move toward southern folk culture. In keeping with the urban emphasis of the Black Arts movements, Gayle (1970, 61) had proclaimed that “the new Afro is to be found...in the Black ghettos of America.” In its commitment to a politically transformed future, Black Aesthetic ideology had urged artists to supersede cultural traditions associated with the oppressive racial history of the rural South. At the peak of the Black Power and Black Arts movements, Gayle asserted that, in the interests of political change, black art “demands the allegiance of men who are capable of transcending the past and challenging the future” (79). But in a more recent essay titled “Reclaiming the Southern Experience: The Black Aesthetic Ten Years Later,” Gayle (1992, 559) exhorts African-American writers to “return to the intellectual past, to undertake the odyssey back into one’s cultural heritage,” and this odyssey entails a reassessment of the South.

In this essay, Gayle regrets that the Black Aesthetic movement of the 1960s discouraged literary explorations of the South, which he now defines as an authentic black cultural domain starkly opposed to “the West.” Gayle contends that the South supports “the genesis of a racial literature” (559) because it is here that African Americans are closest to “the Africa of their ancestors” (558) and can therefore manage to live “wholly and fruitfully outside the ethical system of the West” (563). Although Gayle acknowledges “the fact that modernization, urbanization, and all the concomitant evils have come to the South” (563), he nevertheless identifies the South as the cultural terrain that can authenticate the contemporary African-American writer’s literary project: the writer who taps into southern folklore can be “one with his community, and his works...validated and legitimized by the community itself” (560). The set of moves Gayle performs here is reprinted in much recent African-American literary criticism on the South. In his introduction to the anthology *Black Southern Voices*, published in 1992, John Oliver Killens echoes Gayle in asserting that black southern literature projects a “system of values” that “is different from white America’s.” Like Gayle, Killens claims that the “people of the black South are much closer to their African roots” (3). An imaginative affiliation with Africa is motivated by intense pessimism about political prospects for
African Americans in the United States today: “The black Southern literary tradition gives the lie to the American profession of freedom and humaneness and democracy” (4).

The political implications of the southern folk aesthetic become clearer in light of Paul Gilroy’s distinction between the politics of fulfillment and the politics of transfiguration. In The Black Atlantic, Gilroy argues that the politics of fulfillment operates within a discursive mode, immanent within the modern public sphere, and is impelled by the demand that democratic society live up to its promise. In contrast, the politics of transfiguration is a utopian mode that expresses its “unsayable claims to truth” wholly outside the rational and discursive terms of modern politics. Gilroy (1993a, 37–38) contends that this kind of politics, best exemplified by Afro-diasporic cultural forms, exposes the fissures and contradictions of modern democratic politics. The disaffection with “America” fueling the southern turn in African-American literary studies can easily be understood, in Gilroy’s terms, as a politics of transfiguration aimed at developing a “counterculture of modernity” (36).

A central device used to establish this counterculture that supposedly operates wholly outside the modern West is “conjuring,” or practices of folk religion and healing that are traced back to West Africa. Through conjuring, African-American novelists including Morrison, Shange, Naylor, and Toni Cade Bambara attempt to recover a uniquely black epistemology that is explicitly advanced as an alternative to modern Western (i.e., rational and scientific) forms of knowledge. Morrison (1984b, 342) has described these other ways of knowing, based in intuition and other suprarational faculties, as “discredited knowledge.” The use of conjuring often supports essentializing claims about the culture, epistemology, and cosmology common to all people of African descent, such as, for example, when Morrison flatly asserts that “Black people believe in magic. Once a [white] woman asked me, ‘Do you believe in ghosts?’ I said, ‘Yes. Do you believe in germs?’ It’s part of our heritage” (Taylor-Guthrie 1994, 46).

The southern folk aesthetic is conservative in the literal sense that it seeks to conserve forms of cultural particularity associated with a putatively premodern era, forms that were inextricably embedded in conditions of political and economic marginalization resulting from racial segregation. As Morrison’s remarks on Song of Solomon (quoted earlier) clarify, she wishes to salvage a cultural lore that is threatened by “the political thrust to share in the economy and power of the country.” Here, as in Gilroy’s preference for the politics of transfiguration, racially distinct
forms of cultural value can be shored up only by precluding modern forms of politics, such as the Civil Rights movement, which clearly exemplifies Gilroy’s politics of fulfillment in its effort to extend democratic rights to African Americans.

The politically conservative implications of the literary turn south are further evident in its decisive gendering of modernity and tradition, social change and cultural stability. Not only was the southern turn initiated and established in African-American women’s fiction and literary criticism during the 1970s, but even as it was subsequently elaborated by black male writers, the rural South was associated with a nexus of cultural values that are typically identified with women—home, cultural origin, maternal ancestry, rootedness in place, tradition, and racial authenticity. In novels such as Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, Naylor’s *Mama Day*, Shange’s *Sassafras, Cypress, and Indigo*, and Walker’s *Meridian*, just to name a few, it is women characters who guarantee the continuity of southern folk traditions. Recall that for Baker, the Old South is home to a racially pure cultural tradition, which is subjected to “mulattoization” as it travels to the urban North. In addition to employing a reproductive metaphor for racial purity and corruption, Baker (1991, 36) explicitly feminizes the notion of a racially authentic culture, describing the rural South as the space of black mothers and the urban North as the white father’s territory. Baker’s polarized equations perform the all-too-predictable move, surely disturbing to feminist readers, of imposing on women the symbolic burden of vouchsafing racial and cultural integrity. As feminist scholars writing about a range of national contexts have shown, periods of rapid modernization are attended by social and cultural conflicts that are often managed or resolved around the symbolic figure of woman. As transmitters of durable communal values, women become cultural bulwarks that can stay the dislocating consequences of social change, which is widely perceived to be occurring at accelerated rates in the postmodern era.

But while we must acknowledge the troubling political implications of the southern folk aesthetic, we should also understand why it seems compelling to so many contemporary African-American writers. The southern turn in African-American literary studies may be seen as a historically specific response to the trajectory of urban modernization in the United States. Southern regionalism more broadly speaking has cropped up periodically for over a century, and usually at those moments when the South is on the brink of industrialization, but for much of its history African-American literature has refused to entertain agrarian or pastoral
retreats from modernity. In fact, as I noted earlier, this literary tradition has been powerfully propelled by the promise of modernization, which has demanded journeys out of the rural South into the urban North. The atypical contemporary return to a premodern, rural South bespeaks the exhaustion of the promise of modernity, which has galvanized African-American literature for over a century. Writing in 1925, Alain Locke (1992 [1925], 6) hailed the black urban migration out of the South as a deliberate flight from “medieval America to modern,” as a “mass movement toward the larger and more democratic chance.” Not surprisingly, the hope of gaining access to modern U.S. democracy was couched in emphatically urban terms and required aesthetic distance from the “plantation traditions” of the rural South (Johnson 1969 [1921], 41–42).

In the late twentieth century, disenchantment with the only partial success, as well as the uneven terms, of African-American integration into national life fueled the reverse literary movement away from “America” toward an Africanized rural South. The South must be constructed as a rural place in order to ground a critique of the racially uneven processes of urbanization and modernization. And the impulse to withdraw from modern America, where putatively universal human rights have not been easily extended to African Americans, impels the Africanization of the South, rendering the region a breeding ground for racial specificity and difference. In all these respects, the southern folk aesthetic exemplifies a critical recoil from ideals of political modernity, which, despite their avowed universality, have not been equally available to all. When Morrison remarks to Gilroy (1993b, 178) that African Americans began confronting postmodern dilemmas long before the term became current, I take her to mean that African Americans have long been aware that the political rights vested in the modern humanist subject have not been universally applicable.

The southern folk aesthetic emerged as an identifiable literary movement during a historical conjuncture, the 1970s, in which disillusionment with the failed promise of urban modernity reached a peak. The Watts riot occurred only a few days after the signing of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, signaling the movement of the struggle for racial equality out of the South into the cities. Outbreaks of urban racial violence across the nation during the late 1960s prompted the 1968 Kerner Commission Report on Civil Disorders, which, highlighting the prevalence of racial segregation and discrimination in the urban North, officially certified that
the racial problem had shifted away from the South and had in fact become nationalized. The next decade witnessed the emergence of racialized rhetorics of urban crisis that attributed the socioeconomic problems plaguing U.S. cities in the postmodern era to a collapse of black urban culture and community. Because these discourses exert such severe pressure on the categories of black culture and community, it is hardly surprising that imaginative restoration of black cultural community has seemed so fraught and urgent to African-American writers since the 1970s.

Literary critic Hazel Carby (1991, 41) has argued that the recent academic revival of Hurston’s southern folk aesthetic effects a “discursive displacement” of the urban crises confronting black America. In other words, by locating authentic black culture and community in a bygone rural setting, African-American literary critics are shying away from a frontal encounter with contemporary urban problems. Yet, like most forms of literary pastoralism, the southern folk aesthetic in African-American literature is obliquely responding to contemporary urban conditions through its very pointed retreat from these conditions. Depicting wholesome black communities and cultural traditions, novels such as Morrison’s Song of Solomon or Naylor’s Mama Day directly dispute the alarmist claims (rife in the media as well as academic scholarship) about the pathology of black culture in the postmodern period. At the same time, by situating their positive images of community in the rural South of the past, such literary texts interrogate the equation of modernization with racial progress and clarify the cultural costs of urbanization for African Americans.

The southern folk aesthetic in black literary studies shares much with the broader trend toward southern regionalism. Taking the spatial turn typical of postmodern cultural politics, both movements construct the South of the past as a countermodern site, pitting local cultural traditions against recent processes of economic, political, and social modernization. Each posits an inverse relation between the realms of culture and political economy. Affirmation of cultural particularism in each case requires a foreclosure of political and economic change, specifically the changes in southern social order wrought by the Civil Rights movement and the industrial boom. The cultural traditions each movement attempts to consolidate are inextricably embedded in the deeply inequitable conditions of racial segregation. Hinging cultural integrity and community on racial segregation, both movements deploy the trope of segregation-equals-congregation that recurs in recent historical studies of the Jim Crow South.
In a scathing critique of this trope in his essay “Romancing Jim Crow: Black Nostalgia for a Segregated Past,” political scientist Adolph Reed Jr. (1996, 26) contends that the “current nostalgia for the organic community black Americans supposedly lost with the success of the civil rights movement is so frighteningly shortsighted and dangerous.” Texts romancing the Jim Crow South, Reed argues, are “propelled by a naïve trope of modernization that presumes our world to be constantly increasing in complexity and divisiveness, contrasting it to a comfortingly static past” (ibid.). Among the charges that can be leveled at texts idealizing the Old South is that they “fals[i]y the past” (24), substituting a partial memory for historical truth. This sort of objection can be applied to nonfictional texts such as the memoirs Reed discusses in his essay, which claim to accurately reconstruct an actual past. However, novels that romance Jim Crow cannot be justly censured for misrepresenting a historical past that they do not purport to be recapturing in the first place. Much of the black fiction that takes the Jim Crow South as its setting in fact italicizes its own fictive nature. For example, though Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* and Naylor’s *Mama Day* both contain idealized portrayals of black cultural traditions and communities flourishing in a segregated South, they also guard against literal interpretations of these portrayals by stressing that they are aspiring to imaginative transcendence rather than mimetic fidelity. That Morrison’s Shalimar cannot be found on a Texaco map or that Naylor’s Willow Springs is located off the map of the United States indicates that their rural South is not meant as a supposedly real place that existed in the past but instead as a terrain charted by the literary imagination. *Mama Day* in particular emphasizes that its South is a literary construct through an overload of pastoral allusions. An insistence on their historical impossibility (and on literary invention) deflects the type of political critique that can be leveled against recent nonfictional romancers of the Jim Crow South.

A key distinction, then, between the southern folk aesthetic as practiced by novelists and nonliterary southern regionalism (under which category I would include African-American literary criticism, as distinct from literary fiction) is that the one celebrates a blatantly fictive South, whereas the other seeks in fact to recuperate the traditional social order of the region. After all, Morrison’s and Naylor’s novels are not recommending an actual return to racial segregation and political and economic exclusion. It is precisely because the material conditions of possibility for organic racial community have become irretrievable (if they ever existed at all) that these literary texts strive to recover such community at an imaginary level.
Also important here is the fact that most of the novelists associated with southern folk aesthetics have published fiction squarely treating contemporary urban realities—for example, Morrison’s *Jazz*, Bambara’s *Those Bones Are Not My Child*, Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Linden Hills*, or Shange’s *Liliane*. But such urban fiction is almost entirely overlooked in recent African-American literary criticism, and in fact this erasure is what makes possible the canonization of a black literary tradition rooted in southern folk experience. Many African-American novelists have also published fiction set in the South that depicts the social upheavals of the Civil Rights era, notably Walker’s *Meridian* and Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters* (as well as lesser-known and more recent works such as Thulani Davis’s *1959* and Maxine Clair’s *Rattlebone*). These novels explicitly grapple with the question of which past cultural practices can spur projects of political change and which can survive such change. However, literary criticism on African-American fiction dealing with the South concentrates on identifying and affirming authentically black cultural practices (such as “conjuring” and oral tradition) associated with folklife in the days of segregation.

In this respect, what I have been calling the “southern folk aesthetic” is a construct of a literary criticism that partakes of the broader tendencies of postmodern cultural politics. The literary criticism that is institutionalizing southern folk cultural values as most authentically African American is, in common with other strains of southern regionalism, also reifying an internally diverse region that is in the throes of dramatic transformation. As I have argued in this essay, such postmodern projects of regional resistance can yield incisive critiques of the uneven geographical and racial development of capitalist modernization. But the utopian dimensions of such projects—as evinced in their models of organic community drawn from the past—are fraught with political risk. In postmodern cultural politics, it is the places most conspicuously left behind by economic processes of modernization that are typically identified as spaces of greatest cultural resistance to advanced capitalism. This logic of the residual often entails an aestheticized view of material deprivation as a necessary condition of cultural value. Underdeveloped geographical regions are romanticized as the most effective sites of social critique, as is the case, for example, in the turn of intellectuals such as Fredric Jameson (1988, 16, 19–20, 21) to “third-worldism” as the most appealing strategy for opposing advanced capitalism. Another instance that I have discussed here is Gilroy’s work, which discredits the “politics of fulfillment” for its implication in Western
modernity and valorizes a “politics of transfiguration” that can only be realized in the sphere of culture. When cultural resistance is identified with forms and practices that somehow wholly escape the modern, and when modern politics is regarded as thoroughly compromised, the category of politics is inevitably surrendered to the modern West.

The postmodern romance of the residual tends to construct spaces of resistance as pure elsewheres to the dominant socioeconomic system. For example, the very title of Soja and Hooper’s essay, “The Spaces That Difference Makes,” which is a manifesto of sorts for postmodern cultural politics, implies that social differences occupy determinate spaces. As Stephen Connor (1989) has pointed out, the spatial metaphors of postmodern cultural theory seem oddly anachronistic, offering the false reassurance that the lines of power and resistance, dominance and difference, are visible in this or that place—or that the spaces that difference makes are clearly identifiable. Connor goes on to argue that what may define the era of multinational capitalism is precisely that nodes of power and resistance are not so readily separable (254–55). When critical alternatives to modernization are identified with residual modes that putatively operate entirely outside the logic of modernity, it becomes hard to imagine the mediated relations between different domains and constituencies that would be necessary for progressive social change. This also curtails the critical reach of recent discourses of southern difference, which seek to conserve particularistic and counter-modern forms of cultural value at the steep cost of stalling economic and political change.

References


