



BOOK REVIEW:

Heidi Siegrist. *All Y'all: Queering Southernness in US Fiction, 1980–2020*. The University of North Carolina Press, 2024. 224 pages. ISBN: 978-1-4696-8281-5. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/book.124168>.

In *All Y'all: Queering Southernness in US Fiction, 1980–2020*, Heidi Siegrist intervenes in southern and queer studies to make a case for reading queerness and southernness as parallel, if not co-constitutive. Southernness is a form of queerness and queerness is a form of southernness—in the sense that southernness is perceived as deviant Otherness. *All Y'all* inscribes itself into the emergent scholarship on the queer South, and it contributes to topical discussions in post-southern studies.

Although a more explicit reason for the temporal delimitation (why 1980–2020?) would have added some clarity to the book, overall this work offers intriguing and nuanced readings of both (semi-)canonical US/southern texts and lesser-known authors. One concern this reviewer has with the conceptualization of “post-southern” studies in general is that expanding the meaning of “the South” ad infinitum risks making the term meaningless. Siegrist avoids this by not limiting her study to *southern* fiction per se, but instead focusing on *US fiction* that represents the South more broadly.

In her four thematically, theoretically, and temporally diverse chapters, Siegrist traces the co-constructions of queerness and southernness by “queering the queer south” (1). Each chapter centers on a select few authors or works that illustrate how queerness and Southernness are articulated through disparate themes such as

food, the swamp, southern nostalgia, melancholia, and vampires.

In the first chapter, “Southern-Fried Perversions: Queer Appetites in the Works of Fannie Flagg and Dorothy Allison,” Siegrist traces queerness in southern fiction through its articulation to food and eating. The analysis of Flagg’s *Fried Green Tomatoes* is particularly engaging, whereas the reading of Allison’s short story collection is less persuasive. The section focusing on Allison is also significantly shorter—about half the length—than the section on Flagg, which in itself is unproblematic; however, here it results in a slightly unfinished feeling to the chapter. The chapter furthermore includes a sort of interlude between the two authors, in which Siegrist briefly discusses the cookbook *White Trash Cooking* (1986) by Ernest Mathew Mickler. At first, this section seems like an odd inclusion; however, Siegrist manages to make it meaningful as a contextual bridge between her readings of Flagg and Allison.

Chapter two, “Near ‘Bout: Randall Kenan’s Swampy Southern Queerness,” turns to the southern swamp as a site of queer and Black potentiality. Focusing on most of the entire authorship of Randall Kenan, Siegrist explores how the swamp promotes various reconfigurations of spatial organization, from the plantation as an ur-symbol of the Old South to the texts themselves as sites of spatial/formalist innovation

and play. Kenan's oeuvre, Siegrist insists, "asks us as readers, to revise our expectations of southernness, to reorient to it as a space of possibility for Black, queer resistance" (86).

From this queer, Black resistance, Siegrist pivots to the Lost Cause, melancholy, and queer mourning in "Pornographies of History: Queer Southern Melancholy in the Works of Monique Truong and George Saunders." Siegrist is careful not to equate southern melancholy with queer melancholy throughout the chapter, and rather than argue only for their similarities, she traces their differences and importantly outlines how they resonate despite fundamental incompatibilities. This chapter dives into two works by Saunders and one novel by Truong to explore how they approach the historical imaginary of the South. Although these texts do different things, Siegrist shows both the strengths and the limitations of melancholy as a reparative tool for destabilizing national and regional mythologies. Melancholy can (but does not necessarily) offer a backwards glance in order to imagine a different future, and in doing so, this negative affect can be an instrument of change.

The final chapter, "Southern Gothic Hospitality: Or, Inviting in the Queer Vampires of Poppy Z. Brite, George R. R. Martin, and Jewelle Gomez," is perhaps simultaneously the most conventional and potentially the most divisive in the book (only one of these authors is southern, even if the definition of 'southern' is stretched). Here Siegrist revisits the "generically familiar" (127) vampire through readings of William Joseph Martin (aka Poppy Z. Brite), George R. R. Martin, and Jewelle Gomez. This chapter engages with the recent post-Ricean history of the southern gothic through firstly invoking the queer vampire figure as a recognizable monstrous shorthand for sexual and other kinds of deviance in George R. R. Martin's *Fevre Dream* (1982). Secondly, Siegrist reads Brite and Gomez as examples of how this traditional shorthand

can be complicated and reconstructed to produce an image of queer vampirism as more contradictory, unstable, and, yes, *queer*—multiple, fluid, oppositional, and indefinable. Throughout *All Y'all*, the Southern Gothic stalks Siegrist's analyses, from Flagg's grotesque storytelling to Saunders's and Truong's ghostly melancholia, but outside of this chapter on queer vampires, it is not engaged with in depth. However, this is a minor point that does not detract from Siegrist's expansive analyses and capacious scope.

Siegrist ends with a coda on "Dragging Southernness," a somewhat truncated meditation on (perceived traditional) southern gender conventions, which, she argues, "are particularly 'drag'able because they are already highly imitative: performative, well-circulated, and accordingly ripe for parody that deconstructs the idea of natural gender" (182). Siegrist covers a lot of ground in very few pages (pp. 159-65): Dolly Parton's gender performance, Lizzo's (problematic) queer allyship, southern states' curtailing of LGBTQ+ rights, Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* and Scarlett O'Hara, to name a few topics. Because the reflections included in these pages are important, they deserve a little more attention than this coda gives them.

Interspersed with the traditional literary readings of her chosen texts, Siegrist includes essayistic personal anecdotes to situate or introduce the topics each chapter discusses. These lend the text a personal style that is refreshing, but may not be to everyone's liking. It could be argued that including more cultural or social contextual material instead would have given the book a more universal academic appeal. However, this is not Siegrist's errand with *All Y'all*, and as she alludes in the introduction, the personal touch is significant "in our current political climate, as LGBTQ rights become increasingly precarious" (18). By coupling this personal aspect to

the chapters' thematic concerns, Siegrist highlights what is at stake for her individually, but also demonstrates why a book like this matters.

Some chapters are more focused than others and some will probably require prior familiarity with the literary artifacts in question, but this book should be an engaging read for anyone interested in representations of southernness and southerners and the US South's literary history, as it broadens our views of what counts as "the South." *All Y'all* persuasively illustrates how, in US fiction, the South is always already queer(ed).

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