Southern Accents

Derek Parker Royal

Brannon Costello and Qiana J. Whitted, eds. *Comics and the U.S. South*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2012. xvi + 342 pp. $55.00

According to artist/theorist Scott McCloud, comics utilize space in the same way that film relies on time: it is an essential and defining means through which to present a sequential narrative. The context of the comics page, the arrangement of its panels, and the composition within frames, are what generates meaning and drives the story forward. It is therefore only appropriate that Brannon Costello and Qiana J. Whitted present in their edited collection, *Comics and the U.S. South*, a study of comics through the lens of geographic and cultural space. Focusing on comics that represent the American South and its many facets, whether or not created by southerners themselves, the twelve contributors to this volume make the argument that the South is not primarily an oral culture, as popular belief would have it, but also a largely visual one as well.

As Costello and Whitted make clear in their introduction to the collection, while the South figures largely in the history of the medium—most notably in daily comic strips—there has been a dearth of scholarship on this subject within comics studies. The various essays in *Comics and the U.S. South*, therefore, are particularly poised to fill this critical gap, not only by revealing how comics can bring new perspectives to Southern studies in general, but also by demonstrating "how engaging key questions in Southern studies can contribute to comic studies" as well, "opening up alternate ways of reading new and familiar texts" (vii). This mutually beneficial framework—how comics studies enlightens thematic or genre studies, and vice versa—is the book’s greatest strength, and as such, is a text with far reaching implications outside of comics studies. In this way that *Comics and the U.S. South* stands alongside other recent analyses that figure comics thematically or culturally, e.g., in light of ethnic, racial, gender, and class concerns. Indeed, what makes Costello and Whitted’s collection so significant is that it is the first study of its kind to read comics as an expression of American regionalism.

The twelve essays here presented are divided into four sections: “The South in the National Imagination,” “Emancipation and Civil Rights
Resistance,” “The Horrors of the South,” and “Revisualizing Stories, Reading Images.” The first is a series of close readings of comics that de-emphasize any traditional notions of Southern exceptionality and instead illustrate literally how Southerners imprints national identity. Leading off the collection, appropriately enough, is M. Thomas Inge, who perhaps more than any other scholar has brought a discerning reading to both comics and figurations of the South. His contribution concerns two of the twentieth century’s most enduring daily strips, Li’l Abner (1934–1977) and Snuffy Smith (based on a character first appearing in Barney Google in 1934), and how their representations of Appalachian culture largely defined the South in the popular imagination. Brian Cremins makes a similar move, reading Walt Kelly’s popular Pogo not only as a comic heavily invested in Southern identity, but one that attempts to reframe the region as a locus for racial reconciliation. In his reading of Mark Gruenwald’s run on Captain America during the 1980s, Brannon Costello shows how this popular superhero became a way of narrating anxieties surrounding the South’s mixed history of tradition and progress. Similarly, Christopher Whitty reads one of the South’s most notable political cartoonists, Doug Marlette, as a gauge for the tensions underlying the rise of Sun Belt culture of the 1970s and 1980s.

Next is a series of essays exploring creators who illustrate race as a defining feature of Southern history. In her study of Kyle Baker’s Nat Turner (2008), Conseula Francis argues that the graphic novel is able to make visible a language of violence and desperation left wanting in the original 1831 account and, in doing so, helps to distinguish Thomas Ruffin Gray’s problematic Confessions from other slave narratives from the nineteenth century. Tim Caron provides an insightful reading of Mat Johnson and Warren Pleece’s Incognegro: A Graphic Mystery (2008), a narrative of racial passing that uses the visual medium of comics as a critique on “coloring” in the South. Rounding out this section is an analysis of Howard Cruse’s seminal coming-out graphic novel, Stuck Rubber Baby (1995). Here, Gary Richards highlights Cruse’s linking of racial and gay discrimination while at the same time problematizing the artist’s, at times, sentimentalizing of African American culture during the Civil Rights period.

One of the most interesting sections of the collection, “The Horrors of the South,” comprises three essays that take as their focus mainstream horror comics. Working from the conventions of zombification, and focusing primarily on the Louisiana bayou, Qiana Whitted discusses Alan Moore’s work on DC Comic’s Swamp Thing (1984–1987) and Jeremy Love’s Bayou (2009) as postmodern sociocultural commentaries on racial oppression. This is followed by close readings of two other popular
series, Mike Mignola’s *Hellboy* (1994-present) and Garth Ennis’s *Preacher* (1995-2000). In the former, Joseph Michael Sommers applies a Bakhtinian reading to witchcraft and its links to Appalachian lore, while Nicolas Labarre in his contribution looks at how Ennis uses metafictional techniques to emphasize a Southern “way of seeing the world” (242) and critique the way the South has been represented in the popular media.

It is worth pausing here to highlight one of *Comics and the U.S. South’s* greatest assets: its willingness to engage with “alternative” comics—
a problematic way of describing the kinds of “literary” graphic narratives typically favored by college instructors—without marginalizing mainstream and popular titles. We see this not only in its contributors’ handling of top-selling horror comics, but also in discussions on superhero titles, such as *Captain America*, and well-known strips like *Pogo* and *Li’l Abner*. (Newspaper dailies are sorely underrepresented in current comics studies scholarship.) In other words, Costello and Whitted ensure a more democratic approach to their subject matter, pulling from a wide variety of comics that underscores and complements the multifaceted nature of Southern culture.

The collection ends with two essays that explore the intersections of oral and visual culture. Alison Mandaville discusses not the translation of text-based literature into comics form, but how one prose writer, Randall Kenan, adapts comics conventions to reimagine our understandings of Southern community. And Anthony Dyer Hoefer looks at Josh Neufeld’s webcomic-turned-graphic-novel, *A.D.: After the Deluge* (2010), as a text heavily influenced by multi-media representations. As the author points out, Neufeld’s comic centers on multiple modes of representation (e.g., textual, audial, video, and graphic) as a means to challenging official discourse, in this particular case, the news surrounding Hurricane Katrina and its devastating impact on New Orleans.

*Comics and the U.S. South* is a welcome addition to the growing body of comics scholarship. The work draws its strength from a list of contributors with diverse interests, and who discuss an assortment of comics, but who all share a fascination of the South and the way it has been historically represented. What is more, the book’s engagement with regional studies, as well as its emphasis on multimodal expressions of Southern culture, makes it a far-reaching text appealing to readers in a variety of academic fields. Yet it is highly readable and free of the crippling critical jargon that could limit its appeal. While Costello and Whitted may have provided a collection primarily targeted at scholarly readers, *Comics and the U.S. South* is a text that fanboys and fangirls will find engaging as well.