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Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Jansson, D. (2017)

The work of southering: "Southern justice" and the moral landscape of uneven racism.

Southeastern Geographer, 57(2): 131-150

<https://doi.org/10.1353/sgo.2017.0014>

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:uu:diva-325536>

Jansson, David. 2017. The work of southering: “Southern justice” and the moral landscape of uneven racism. *Southeastern Geographer* 57(2): 131-150. DOI: 10.1353/sgo.2017.0014

ABSTRACT

This article seeks to stimulate a discussion about the ways in which scholars may reproduce the identity discourse of internal orientalism (here called “southering”) and the moral landscape of uneven racism in the process of critiquing injustice in the southeastern states. It points to the problems with making explicit and unsubstantiated comparisons on issues such as racism between the “South” and “North” and highlights discursive forms that risk triggering reader interpretations (such as the idea of “Southern distinctiveness”) that may be inconsistent with the intentions of the author. It ends by considering a few strategies for minimizing the communication of unintended messages, including more precision with regard to temporal and spatial boundaries, using a form of the “contrapuntal method” where generalizations about “the South” are accompanied by statements describing the status of the problem in question in the rest of the country, employing a materialist definition of racism as well as a dialectical analysis that focuses on process and relation.

Keywords: internal orientalism, justice, U.S. South, racism, discourse

[END PAGE 130]

The work of southering:

“Southern justice” and the moral landscape of uneven racism

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to stimulate discussion of the implications of representing “the South,” particularly with regard to the issue of social justice. Such a discussion is necessary because of the potential for our representations to reinforce

[END PAGE 131]

an unproductive and essentialist way of thinking, one that interferes with our ability to both understand socio-spatial processes in the areas we identify as belonging to “the South” and to acknowledge the extent of injustices in the rest of the country.

For most citizens of the U.S., the term “Southern justice” is apt to connote something quite different than the idea of “American justice.” “When the “national mind” thinks “South,” it has long flashed back to the grimmest moments of the 1960s—a sepia-toned montage of police dogs and fire hoses and blown-up black girls in Birmingham, of housewives spitting racist epithets in Little Rock, and of a murdered saint on a hotel balcony in Memphis” (Moser 2008, p 19). The experience of slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and racist violence has left its mark on the public consciousness (Mathews 2006). “The South” is often seen as being hampered by a problematic past, and it is racism in particular that is understood as “the great sorrow and burden of the South” (Roberts 1996, p 96). In a survey of newspaper articles, Griffin (2000, p 59) has demonstrated the persistence of this notion that a racist “Southern” past is a burden for (white) “Southerners.” His analysis of reporting on “the South” shows that “The idea that the South exists on a visibly lower ethical plane is, quite clearly, alive and well” today, and this is

explained at least in part by the association of “the South” with racism and injustice (cf Jansson 2004, 2007).

Representations of “the South” as oppressive and socially backward help to construct an “American” identity that stands for the pursuit of justice. The notion that representations of “the South” as an Other contribute to the construction of a national sense of Self is by now widely argued; I have framed this “America”/“the South” binary as an example of “internal orientalism” (Jansson 2003a; 2005a; 2010a) and others have made similar observations (e.g. Burns 1991; Winders 2005; Ring 2012). The imagined space of “the South” has played a particularly important role in national mappings of justice and morality. As Woodward (1965, p 133) so memorably wrote, the region “has long served the nation [as] a deflector of national guilt, a scapegoat for stricken conscience. It has served the country...as a floor under self-esteem.” We can thus point to benefits to the “Northern” psyche of the idea that “the South” is a moral cesspool and an intransigent site of ongoing injustice (Zinn 1964; Duck 2006). In a sense, much of the work of representing “the South” involves the projection of social problems in “the North” onto “the South” (which is *not* to say that those problems do not already exist in the region).¹ This projection creates a moral landscape of uneven racism, where the “peaks” and “valleys” of racism are located respectively in “the South” and “the North.” An implication of this is that white “Northerners” are less able to see the racism in their own backyards due to the overwhelming association of “the South” with problems such as racism and segregation (Hall 2005). As Wolfe (2008) notes, “Mention the civil rights movement and Birmingham, Selma and Memphis spring to mind. Rarely do we recall Boston, Pittsburgh and Cleveland.” For Baker and Nelson (2001, p 234), “the South” acts as an alibi that preserves “white geographical innocence” through the way it marks “an outlaw, retrograde,

[END PAGE 132]

socially imagined, and almost always entirely fictional United States territory that contains white racism.”

At the same time, critical scholars need not blindly accept this conceptualization of “Southern justice.” Alternative understandings exist, for example, among many African Americans in the southeastern states, who equate “Southern identity” with a history of struggle for justice and equality, thus enabling them to proudly identify as “Southerners” (Jansson 2010a). And consider the evolution in the perception of “the South” of Iya’Falola Omobola, a black activist from “the North” who at first felt uneasy after she moved to Jackson, Mississippi, but who gradually came to see Jackson as “the place where NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers was murdered in 1963; where the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee did much of its organizing for Mississippi’s Freedom Summer; and where Stokely Carmichael delivered an important speech in 1966 about black power as a psychological response to fear” (Davie 2014). “Southern” justice, heritage, and identity can indeed represent the struggle for civil rights and equality. While such perspectives are not the main focus of this article, I do want to recognize their existence and acknowledge their power and currency.

I seek here to develop an argument regarding the need for those of us who represent “the South” in our research to be aware of the ways in which we may contribute to this problematic discourse of “the South” as alibi and container of the nation’s injustice, and thus reproduce “white geographical innocence.” In that respect, I respond to Ayers’s plea that scholars consider “what we talk about when we talk about the South” (Ayers 1996). Many scholars and journalists writing about the region, including geographers, do not actively confront the implications of what might be happening when they write about “the South.” An analysis of geographic work on

“Southern (in)justice” that emphasizes the question of what we are doing when we are writing about “the South” is lacking in the literature. For example, while social justice in “the South” is the topic of a special issue of this journal (vol. 47, no. 1), none of the articles therein address the risk that representations of injustices in “the South” may *implicitly suggest* (when they do not state outright) that “the North” does not suffer from the injustices one finds in “the South” (especially with regard to racism). Such unintended messages help create a default “American” national identity that is accepted as a taken-for-granted standard, a subject position from which to judge peoples, places, and events and which may shade social problems outside “the South” from the view. Thus, it is important, as Alderman and Good (1997, p 38) argue, to “examine how the very idea of a culturally distinct South has been used to organize, represent, and structure American social life.” In other words, we need to understand what kind of “culture work” (Griffin 2000, p 71) is done by these representations.

The analysis proceeds as follows. The risk that geographers contribute to the reproduction of the internal orientalist discourse about the southeastern states is produced by the binary nature of this discourse, and is embodied in the term *enthymeme*. The first section discusses the structure of the internal orientalist discourse about “the South” (which I will call “southering”) and, from the perspective

[END PAGE 133]

of the literature on discourse, shows how enthymemes may contribute to the sending of unintended messages about “the South.” Next I consider recent work by geographers on the southeastern states, to identify the presence of potential enthymemes and to highlight problematic comparisons and unsubstantiated claims about the “uniqueness” of injustice in “the South.” Finally, I explore the implications of the enthymeme for academic writing on “the

South” and offer suggestions for reducing some of the risks inherent in representation. Such risks can be minimized through the use of the “contrapuntal method,” geographic and temporal specificity, a materialist definition of racism and a dialectical approach.

First a note about style. I use scare quotes when referring to “the South” and “America” (and their derivatives) partly in order to problematize the meaning of these terms and emphasize their constructedness, and partly because different people mean different things when they use these terms. (Jon Smith (2013, p 22) goes so far as to write that “‘the South’ is, for me, a meaningless term, naming nothing but fantasies.”) Furthermore, “Southerner” has long been understood to mean “white Southerner” (Webster and Leib 2001). Similarly, the term “America” is not necessarily more inclusive in many of its usages; many people who embrace the label “American” live in other countries throughout North, Central and South America. The quotation marks are intended to signify the contested and contingent nature of these terms. When I wish to try to reference the material reality of the region “outside” of the identity discourse of southering, I will refer to “the southeastern states.” This is an inherently problematic, but I think necessary, linguistic strategy to circumvent the corrupting influence of southering. It is problematic in part because it is difficult to prevent slippage between “the southeastern states” and “the South,” and any merging of the two terms renders the use of my alternative irrelevant, and in part because the issue of the specific geographic boundaries of “the southeastern states,” regardless of how they are drawn, will always be arbitrary. But this strategy is necessary because, if one wishes to counter the discourse, one needs to at least attempt to find a way to reference the actual materiality and lived experiences that one finds in the places that are thought to be interpellated by the term “the South.”

IDENTITY THEORY, INTERNAL ORIENTALISM, AND SOUTHERING

The theoretical foundation of my critique employs the insights of what is sometimes referred to as poststructural identity theory (see Gallaher 2003 for a useful discussion), as elaborated through a geographic perspective on the framework of internal orientalism. This framework emphasizes the role of Self/Other distinctions and representations of the Other in the creation of geographic identities. The production of difference is not innocent; as Braidotti (2002, p. 4) argues, “the concept of difference has been poisoned and has become the equivalent of inferiority: to be different from means to be worth less than.” The recognition of the meaning of the Other is essential to the determination of the boundaries of the Self “and to the comprehension of the content of the identity those boundaries define” (Norton 1986, p 7). One implication of

[END PAGE 134]

this line of reasoning is that representations of the Other say more about the Self than they reveal about the Other. As Jakle (1990, p 89) argues in the context of travel writing, “Most constructs described other people, with the traveler’s self-concept implicit but unstated.” Descriptions of an Other are a form of silence that speaks, in that they reinforce the Self’s taken-for-granted identity even when nothing is explicitly stated about the Self. This aspect of representation is crucial, because it creates a situation where representations of an Other can be extrapolated to produce particular meanings (e.g. the Self is not afflicted with the Other’s characteristic problems) even if the author did not intend them.

Internal orientalism involves the othering of a population within the nation-state (Schein 1997), and a geographic perspective highlights the spatiality of this internal othering in that a region within the nation-state serves as an internal Other (Jansson 2003a, 2003b, 2004, 2005a,

2007, 2010a; Eriksson 2008, 2010a, 2010b; Johnson and Coleman 2012). While this way of thinking about internal orientalism has the potential to provide insights into spatial dynamics that are internal to states, there is certainly cause to revisit the way internal orientalism has been conceptualized. However, while Johnson and Coleman (2012, p 868) argue that “Internal orientalism posits regions as passive, much as Said characterized the Orient as passive,” this is incorrect. As I previously noted, “the othered region is part of the national state, and this...implies access to the national institutions by the people of the othered region. This suggests that the othered region would have more of a voice in the national discourse than the Orient had in the discourse of the Occident” (Jansson 2003, p 297; see also Eriksson 2010b). But it would be useful to be clearer about the different aspects of internal orientalism, to allow for the possibility that these different aspects may have diverging historical trajectories. Thus I propose that we consider internal orientalism as consisting of three interlocking elements: an identity discourse, asymmetrical political relations, and exploitative economic relations. As an identity discourse, internal orientalism produces a binary where the nation constructs an exalted national identity in part through representing a region as an inferior Other. The asymmetrical political relations are expressed in part through the desire and attempt to remake the region in the image of the nation, politically, socially, and culturally. The exploitative economic relations are characterized by the disproportionate benefitting of economic interests outside the region through a kind of colonization of the region. In the case of internal orientalism in the U.S., I refer to these three elements, respectively, as southering, reconstruction, and internal colonialism. All three elements put the region at a disadvantage in relation to the rest of the country, but the precise nature of their composition may change over time (and, indeed, one or more may cease to

be active at any point in time). This perspective will be developed in more detail elsewhere; in this article it is the first of these three elements that is highlighted.

Thus, I refer to the identity discourse of internal orientalism in the U.S. as “southering” (rhymes with “othering”). In the case of the U.S., “the South” is a key regional Other, and white “Southerners” are the embodiment of “the South” in the discourse of southering. Statements [END PAGE 135]

about “the South” may inform various kinds of identity, such as cultural, ideological, class, gender, and so on. From a geographic perspective, southering informs most directly a national-scale identity, as “the South” tends to be compared to “the rest of the country.” In other words, “the South” is typically understood as a “historic transgression to *national* rules” (Winders 2007, p 921, emphasis added). The “summational statements” (Said 1979, p 255) that define “the South” thereby create the imagined space of the region and simultaneously inform the national sense of Self. This is the foundation for Hale’s (1998) assertion that portrayals of “Southern” violence on television create a national identity that encourages the belief that such violence would never be tolerated outside “the South.” It is also precisely for this reason that our own representations of problems in the southeastern states are susceptible to (unintentionally) reinforcing the idea of “Southern” distinctiveness and the moral landscape of uneven racism.

A brief consideration of the literature on discourse helps illuminate this process by which portrayals of “Southern” injustice create an exalted national identity. Fairclough (2003, p 3) argues that “no real understanding of the social effects of discourse is possible without looking closely at what happens when people talk or write.” Various authors emphasize the performative aspects of discourse; as Gee (2014, p 20) puts it, “when we speak or write, we simultaneously say something, do something, and are something.” Likewise, Fairclough (1992, p 64) argues that

discourses are constitutive of social relations, and not simply reflective of them. Discourse helps to construct social identities and subject positions, social relationships between people, and systems of knowledge and belief.

So discourse is inextricably linked to our ways of understanding the world around us and even ourselves. But we also need to consider how different forms of discourse produce different effects and meanings. Fairclough (2003, p 10) notes that meaning-making involves “the production of the text, the text itself, and the reception of the text” and depends in part upon what is implicit in the text. In other words, texts “inevitably make assumptions. What is ‘said’ in a text is ‘said’ against a background of what is ‘unsaid’, but taken as given” (Fairclough 2003, p 40). What is taken as given is shaped by dominant discourses, and as we have seen above, the discourse of southering tends to take it as a given that “the South” is inflicted with social ills to an extent not characteristic of the rest of the country. Meaning-making is also influenced by the implications, presuppositions, and vagueness of our representations. Van Dijk (1993, p 275) argues that these discourse elements can function in ways that reflect an overall strategy on the part of the consumer of texts such that negative properties of an in-group are concealed by emphasizing (or even inventing) negative characteristics of an out-group; “dominance is semantically signalled by positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation or derogation.”

Also relevant is Gee’s (2014, p 91) discussion of the concept “situated meaning,” or the “the potential any given form has for taking on much more specific meanings in contexts of actual use.” Gee (2014, p 92) asks what situated meanings of certain phrases are attributable to the

[END PAGE 136]

producer and consumer of a text, respectively, and he is also interested in the question of which situated meanings are “are *potentially* attributable to these words by interpreters, whether or not we have evidence anyone actually activated that potential in the current case?” It is this question that animates the analysis in the following section, where I review recent work by geographers on “the South.” Judgments about what meanings can be potentially triggered by particular summational statements are justified by reference to the various discourses that shape social understanding of the topic being addressed. What is in focus here are the assumptions, produced and circulated by discourses, that lead our interpretations in certain directions.

We can think of the problem as embodied by the term “enthymeme.” An enthymeme is a kind of informal argument, where “not all of the premises are made explicit” (Morrell and Hewison 2013, p 64). Morrell and Hewison note that the enthymeme can be used as a rhetorical strategy by attempting to persuade an audience by hiding important premises, some of which may be contested or controversial. But the problem I identify in this article has less to do with the intentions of the producer of a text and more with the consumer’s reception of the text. The problem with enthymemes is that a reader may attribute certain assumptions or premises to a text that the producer “didn’t realize were there, doesn’t accept, or didn’t even mean to be part of the argument” (Walton 2001, p 94). So this is *how* representations of “Southern” injustice inform an exalted national identity: they are filtered through the unstated premises that 1) “the South” is *fundamentally different* from the rest of the country, and 2) social ills are *inherent* in the fabric of “Southern” life in a way that is not true of the rest of the country. The important point here is that this extrapolation of the meaning of a text may happen *regardless* of the intention of the author of the text. In part this is simply due to the binary nature of the discourse of southerning;

that is, the juxtaposition of “America” and “the South” produces the risk that the reader will extrapolate from a degenerate regional Other to an exalted national Self.

It may also be useful to return here to the issue of the psychological role of “the South” in the national discourse to understand *why* southering produces these enthymemes. The essentialist binary of southering provides important psychological benefits for many individuals who do not identify as “Southerners,” and these benefits help to explain why such people may even be *inclined* to hear or read unintended messages about “the South” that, first, emphasize its status as Other, and second, suggest that the structural nature of injustice is unique to that region. This means that individuals may have a tremendous emotional investment in a particular understanding of “the South.” As Ayers (1996, p 66) notes: “Americans believe, hope the South is different and so tend to look for differences to confirm that belief, that ‘knowledge.’ . . . When Southerners do not behave in these ways, they are deemed less Southern, less fitted to the place where they live, exceptions.” Thus empirical evidence that challenges expectations can result in an assertion of individual exceptionality rather than the revision of the preconceptions, and this happens in part because of the very effective way in which the “Southern”

[END PAGE 137]

Other serves to undergird a national (as well as personal) identity that stands for such desirable values as tolerance and justice. In fact, I would submit that this personal “service” of southering is available not only to the reader, but also to the writer (even if its resides at a subconscious level), such that we who write about “the South” and feel a commitment to social justice may have a psychological incentive for suggesting that region’s evils are not simultaneously those of the entire nation. Thus we may have a subconscious inclination to produce representations about “the South” that trigger enthymemes on the part of the reader that we did not consciously intend

to communicate. However, as I will suggest later, there may be ways for us to limit the risk for unintended enthymemes to be communicated by our representations.

This section has discussed the theoretical foundations of my argument regarding the risks of communicating unintended messages in our work and thus unwittingly reinforcing southerner's problematic "South"/"America" binary. The next section will take a look at how geographers represent "the South" in order to assess the risk for unintended interpretations and extrapolations arising from this body of work.

GEOGRAPHERS WRITING "THE SOUTH"

As noted above, discourses may consist in part of explicit or implicit comparisons between Self and Other. Thus one problem southerner creates for the writer is that it may incline us to make explicit comparisons between "South" and "North" (in the form of summational statements) that are not immediately supported in the text with evidence. Another problem resides in the tendency to make statements about the situation in "the South" without clarifying the extent to which this critique also applies to the U.S. as a whole (implicit comparisons). With regard to the first problem of unsupported explicit comparisons, one of the most relevant comparisons for this analysis is the idea of "Southern distinctiveness" with regard to racism. I refer to this as the moral landscape of uneven racism, where "the South" is thought to be "more racist" than the rest of the country. The term "moral landscape" has been used previously in studies of the representation of space in the southeastern states as a way to highlight the way religion informs understandings of spatial morality, or the way different places embody different kinds of im/morality (Jansson 2010b; Chapman 2011). Here, though, the focus is on the immorality of racism (more from a social justice rather than religious perspective) and the question of whether we, as scholars, are arguing for a conceptualization of the national landscape

as consisting of peaks of tolerance in “the North” and valleys of racism in “the South” (and hence the distinctiveness of “the South” in the context of racism). For example, Smith and Furuseth (2006, p 197) claim that the “privilege of Whiteness is heightened in the U.S. South, where skin coloration remains a powerful marker for social status,” and Warf (2007, p 95) asserts that “intolerance, racism, etc....are exceptionally pronounced in the South.” The reader might accuse me of taking these statements out of context, but the point here is that in neither article is any *evidence* provided to support the claims that racial privileges are *heightened*, or that racism is

[END PAGE 138]

exceptionally pronounced, in “the South” (whatever those claims might actually mean in the concrete), perhaps because the authors assume that the assertions would seem obvious to the reader. These kinds of explicit comparisons (between “the South” and “the rest of the country”) communicate rather directly the belief that racism is more of a problem in the region than it is elsewhere. Thus one problematic way of representing “the South” is to claim distinctiveness on a problem such as “racism” or “white privilege” without defining and operationalizing this variable and without providing evidence to support the claim.

A somewhat different version of this problem is illustrated by Inwood’s (2012, p. 1453) statement that “Nowhere has racialized territoriality and the creation of master narratives taken on greater significance than in the U.S. South.” What makes this statement different from the two examples above is that Inwood immediately attempts to justify this assessment by describing in general terms how racialized territoriality has worked in “the South.” The problem here is that the very structure of the statement (“nowhere has...taken on greater significance”) is a way of implying “Southern” distinctiveness without explicitly saying so (because the sentence leaves

open the possibility that “racialized territoriality and the creation of master narratives” has had *equal* significance throughout the entire U.S.). Furthermore, Inwood’s description of what racialized territoriality has entailed could easily be extended beyond the southeastern states, and while it may have worked in different ways in different parts of the country, it is not immediately obvious that it has had *more* significance outside the region (see, e.g., Loewen 2005). The statement thus is partly an empirical statement that is difficult to prove and partly a rhetorical device that is ultimately counterproductive.

It is indeed very tempting for us *as people* to believe that “racism” and “injustice” (or their equivalents) are “heightened,” “exceptionally pronounced,” or “more significant” in “the South,” but this desire to believe should not excuse us *as scholars* from critically examining such notions. First of all, as noted above, we should ask what kind of work such statements do. How do they affect our ability to understand the processes that produce “racism” and “injustice”? Furthermore, what do we really mean by these kinds of assertions, and how are we defining these terms? Discussions of “racism” often equate the concept with “prejudice,” a move that eviscerates the concept of its relevance and power. To actually demonstrate (rather than assert) claims of “Southern” distinctiveness requires comparative studies that operationalize (for example) “racism.” This operationalization is highly problematic and fraught with difficulties, but comparative statements of the sort quoted above cannot stand without such a foundation.² At the same time, we should not take for granted the relevance of differences between “North” and “South,” as in doing so we foreclose possibilities for different kinds of analysis and obstruct the path toward different kinds of conclusions. In other words, we should not begin by assuming “the South” will be the most relevant explanatory factor, but instead consider the concept as that which needs to be explained.

Representations that are more subtly troublesome are those that seem to trigger

[END PAGE 139]

notions of “Southern distinctiveness” in a way that *implies* that racism and injustice are somehow uniquely interwoven in the fabric of “the South.” For example, Barbara Ellen Smith (2006, p 235) asks how the strategies of social justice activists in the southeastern states might “include new racial/ethnic groups, while still addressing the historically entrenched racism directed at African-Americans in the South” (is there not “historically entrenched racism” outside “the South”?). Winders (2007, p 934) discusses border processes in the southeastern states, and remarks that the border’s presence “takes place in the midst of, and through, the region’s imbrication with race” (is the rest of the country not “imbricated with race”?). Alderman and Modlin (2013, p 10) write that “the South has long ignored, misrepresented, and trivialized African Americans within its iconography and cultural narratives, especially travel promotions” (has this not happened in the rest of the country?). Short (2014, p 97) claims that “racist attitudes were ingrained” in the “old South” (were they not also in the “New South” and throughout the rest of the country?). Inwood (2013, p 2121, note 1) writes that in “the South” “local actors often resisted the integration of U.S. society” (did not whites in other parts of the U.S. resist racial integration?). Following each quote I have given my reaction to the unintended messages the quotes may be reasonably thought to generate. The risk here is that, because they do not state anything to the contrary, the authors may communicate the idea that what they say about “the South” is not necessarily true about “America.” Whether or not the authors themselves believe these interpretations of their statements is not clear, as they make no immediate comments to that effect. But given the discussion above about discourse and the role of enthymemes in producing

situated meanings, I would suggest that it behooves us to keep in mind the possibility of these interpretations arising.

In some cases, we can find examples of authors who seem to simultaneously assert and challenge “Southern” distinctiveness as it relates to racial injustice. For example, Shrestha and Smith (2002, p 280) state that “of course, not many can forget the racist history of the American South, the geographical bastion of white supremacy, where African Americans were subjected to centuries of institutionalized slavery and dehumanization. The South’s racist past still haunts as white supremacists spread the message of hate in the South and beyond.” It is not at all clear why we should accept the trope of “the South” as the “geographical bastion of white supremacy” if we are to take the latter term seriously, as it too easily erases the legacy of institutionalized slavery, dehumanization, and racial violence *outside* the southeastern states. But then, on the very next page, the authors claim that with regard to “race matters,” very little has changed *in the U.S. as a whole*. So while there is some explicit recognition of racial injustice as a continuing *national* problem, the text still flags the distinctively “Southern” nature of racism in the country. On balance, the authors make a much more impassioned argument for the distinctiveness of “Southern” racial injustice than they do for its “Americanness.”

A similar discursive form can be identified in Ueland and Warf’s (2006, p 53) interesting examination of residential

[END PAGE 140]

segregation by topography. They write that

southern cities constitute a useful study area for the exploration of this topic by virtue of the unique historical trajectory of the region, the legacy of slavery, its relatively high proportion of African Americans, and the especially contentious

political relationships between blacks and whites, often characterized by widespread, overt, and virulent white racism. The South thus offers a meaningful region in which to investigate this topic, given its long, sad history of adverse race relations and continued occasional racial strife. Although similar arguments and observations may pertain to cities elsewhere in the United States, the historical durability and unique characteristics of southern race relationships is particularly important in the context of the issues analyzed here.

This passage is quite interesting because at the point where a reader might interpret the authors as suggesting that “the South” is *uniquely* troubled by its “legacy of slavery,” “widespread, overt, and virulent white racism,” and “sad history of adverse race relations and continued occasional racial strife,” the authors explicitly argue *against* “Southern” distinctiveness in these matters. However, in the end, they still cling to an understanding of the “uniqueness” of “southern race relationships,” without explaining either how they conceptualize such uniqueness or upon what empirical evidence this assumption is based.

We can, in fact, point to a growing body of evidence that argues forcefully against the idea of “Southern” distinctiveness with regard to racial segregation and violence against African Americans.³ There is, after all, a reason why Malcolm X (1966, p 417) famously asserted that “Mississippi is anywhere south of the Canadian border,” why a Brooklyn minister claimed during the 1940s that “when it comes to the way the Negro is treated, the only difference between the North and the South is the weather” (Sugrue 2008, p xxi), and why Martin Luther King, Jr., said in 1960: “The racial issue that we confront in America is not a sectional problem but a national problem.... There is a pressing need for a liberalism in the North that is truly liberal, that firmly believes in integration in its own community as well as in the deep South”

(Theoharis 2003a, p 1).⁴ Whites outside “the South” have for far too long been able to deny their own participation in the processes of racial segregation, in part as a result of southerning’s strong association of “segregation” with “the South.”

The notion of “Southern” distinctiveness with regard to concepts such as “race,” “race relations,” “racial injustice” and “racism,” is deeply problematic, not least, in the words of Alderman and Good (1997, p 24), because this idea “has likely marginalized African Americans, in part by promoting the myth that the North is not racially biased.” Indeed, equating “racism” with “the South” necessarily marginalizes millions of African Americans who happily identify themselves as “Southern,” and ironically relegates them to passive spectators in the “Southern” landscape. This move additionally erases black “Southerners” from the notion of “Southern identity.” There are good reasons, then, to try to avoid reinforcing the idea of “Southern” distinctiveness.

[END PAGE 141]

In this section I have outlined the risks, created by southerning, involved with explicit and implicit comparisons between “South” and “North.” I recognize that by highlighting certain statements from the literature in geography, I might be accused not only of taking quotes out of context but also of “cherry-picking” quotes by selecting only those that support my argument. I wish to stress that the issue I am trying to raise is the possibility that these statements reveal something fundamental about the way we conceptualize the moral landscape in the U.S. Perhaps the statements I have quoted here are simply throw-away lines that were not meant to be over-interpreted. Perhaps they result from sloppiness in expressing the thoughts of the author (an offense I myself am often guilty of in the process of writing). But I wish to raise the possibility that they actually reflect our fundamental understandings of the meaning of the imagined space

of “the South” and its relationship to the rest of the U.S., in which case we should be aware of how such assumptions may influence our research, and how they might in turn reinforce southering. Given that none of the publications referenced in this section explicitly discuss the author’s view of “Southern” distinctiveness, we have no evidence from the publications that would help clarify the issue. Finally, regarding the question of cherry-picking, I will in fact consider below writing that takes a very clear stand *against* the idea of “Southern” distinctiveness, and, crucially, discuss what it is in the author’s approach that facilitates this critical perspective.

With that said, I will now review steps writers can take to minimize interpretations that are inconsistent with their own intentions.

MINIMIZING THE RISKS OF SOUTHERING

At the most basic level, our statements should be clearly defined both temporally and spatially. That is, we should specify precisely the *when* and the *where* of our subject. For example:

Most liberals in the South (and, it seems, the North) were racists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in the sense that when they thought about it at all, they accepted the “scientific” finding that Negroes were biologically or culturally inferior to the more developed “race” of white people.

(Chappell 1994, p 3)

Chappell delimits the temporal and spatial bounds here, though “the South” is rather fuzzy as a spatial bound (as is, in fact, “the North”). (Chappell could also change “liberals” to “white liberals” to be more accurate.) I suggest that the more geographically (and temporally)

specific we are, the less likely statements we make will reinforce southering because this specificity is less likely to activate the “America”/“the South” binary.

Part of what Chappell does in the above quote is to briefly introduce a comment that challenges the distinctiveness of “the South” with regard to racism. One can even be more thorough, following Nolen’s (1967, p xix) example: “While focusing attention on the popular ideology of white supremacy which rationalized the development of quasi-slavery in the New South, I do not wish to say that Southern whites alone among Americans were racist.” Here Nolen explicitly attempts to neutralize the interpretation that he is suggesting that non-“Southern” whites were not racist,

[END PAGE 142]

and thus potentially reduces the potential for the reader to understand that Nolen is making an implicit comparison.

These examples have much in common with the “contrapuntal method” as described by Edward Said. Said (1993, p 51) uncovers the effects of imperialism on the cultural productions of the West by reading the “cultural archive” “contrapuntally, with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts.” One version, then, of the contrapuntal method is to always be aware, as an author, of the relevant “counterpoints” in one’s analysis, and the power of the “America”/“South” binary means that representations of “the South” are productively accompanied by the counterpoint of “America” (or “the North”).

An example of what I mean here, worth quoting at length, is historian James Cobb’s (2005) essay on Hurricane Katrina.

Even before the hurricane, more than two-thirds of the poverty-level families with children in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama fell into the “working poor” category. This figure is pretty much standard across the Old Confederacy, meaning that a great many Southerners beyond the physical reach of the storm would also be at the mercy of any such catastrophe of similar proportions. However, the same might be said for the almost equally prevalent working poor in such decidedly un-Southern locales as Minnesota, Michigan, Ohio and Pennsylvania, where folks have been laid low by wholesale outsourcing of jobs and economic policies that have left real wages stagnant and a social safety net in ever greater disrepair...As community after community across the South opened its arms to the displaced, small-town papers were awash in stories about middle-class whites who had obviously made homeless and penniless evacuees the first black guests ever to sit at their tables and sleep on their sheets. These breakthroughs might seem especially emblematic of change in Southern white racial attitudes, but my guess is that there were a lot of these “firsts” registered as well in homes above the Mason-Dixon line where Hurricane Katrina victims found shelter.

In my view this passage is quite effective. First, Cobb’s labels are for the most part spatially well defined (by referring specifically to certain states, as well as the “Old Confederacy,” which at least is a clear spatial unit in a way that “the South” is not). In addition, he appears to show an awareness of assumptions readers may draw if he fails to point out that what he is saying about “the South” applies as well to the non-“South.” In this form of the contrapuntal method, the author seeks to avoid the reader’s perception of an implicit comparison

(and the reproduction of the moral landscape of uneven racism) by *explicitly* stating that he does not see “the South” as distinctive in this particular context. Cobb thus acknowledges the power of the “North”/“South” binary and the relevance of addressing them contrapuntally with regard to the topic of “race relations.”

I do not wish to be understood as arguing that it *never* makes sense to discuss differences between social practices

[END PAGE 143]

in the southeastern states and those in other parts of the U.S. However, when doing so we should be very clear about the precise phenomena we are analyzing as well as the specific reasons for any differences. For example, as Bonilla-Silva (2001, p 91-92) points out, the subordinate status of African Americans has been historically produced in different ways corresponding to differences in the local institutional context:

In terms of social control, blacks in the South [during the Jim Crow period] were regulated by the actions of individual whites, violent racist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan, mob violence in the form of lynching, and the lack of law enforcement by state agencies. In the North, blacks suffered less from these practices largely because they were extremely segregated residentially and, in most places, were a small minority, thus not posing a “threat” to whites. However, whenever blacks “crossed the line,” whites erupted in violence such as during the race riots of the late 1910s.

By acknowledging such regional differences in this way we can more easily avoid an oversimplified moral calculus that desires, above all else, to find some way to preserve “Southern” distinctiveness and the moral landscape of uneven racism. Given such a concrete

examination of regional difference, it becomes difficult (and largely irrelevant) to argue that one part of the country is *more* “racist” than another.

A related issue is how we define racism in our work. It appears that in many cases, we tend to equate “racism” with “prejudice.” But as we will see below, a materialist definition of racism can be much more effective than a discursive definition in advancing the contrapuntal method for studying social justice in the U.S.

The work of geographer Joshua Inwood is particularly helpful in highlighting the value of both the contrapuntal method and a materialist definition of racism. With regard to the first, with rare exceptions (one of which is referenced above), Inwood typically argues *against* “Southern” distinctiveness and *for* seeing racial injustice as an inherently *national* problem in the U.S. (occasional quotes to the contrary notwithstanding). Even when writing about empirical cases in the southeastern states, Inwood generally places racial injustice in the relevant national context. For example, Inwood (2009, p 88) writes that throughout U.S. history, “racial formation and US collective identity has been defined by racial separation and exploitation....Race is integral to the workings and exercise of US state power...race continues to lie at the heart of US society.” Inwood refers repeatedly to “the US racial project” (2013, p 2122) and the “white supremacist US state” (2015, p 411). Similarly, Inwood (2012a, p 609) writes that “racial violence and its simultaneous exclusions are deeply ingrained into US society” and “race and racism have been central to the creation of the nation” (Inwood 2015, p 420). One is fairly bludgeoned over the head with the message that racism is a national problem, it is a *national* problem, and *it has always been* a national problem. Inwood displays here an intuitive understanding of the importance of addressing the region and the nation contrapuntally. This allows Inwood to eschew the use of “the South” as an *a priori* organizing logic, which means his

[END PAGE 144]

analysis is not arbitrarily limited by the Mason-Dixon line.

With regard to the materialist definition of racism, Inwood follows Gilmore (2007, p 28) in conceptualizing racism as “the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death” (Inwood 2012, p 1452). Thus he dispenses with the weaker formulation of racism as being equivalent to prejudice, and I suggest that this helps him to avoid an analysis that is overly influenced by southering. Additionally, the benefits of a materialist definition of racism are strengthened by its articulation through a dialectical analysis. This approach has been used in a compelling series of papers involving collaborations between Inwood, James Tyner and Derek Alderman with a particular focus on the concept of “violence.” Inspired particularly by Ollman’s (2003) interpretation of Marxian dialectics, these researchers implore us to understand violence “not as having a universal quality but rather as something that unfolds through political, economic, and social processes” (Tyner et al. 2014, p 903). The advantage of dialectics is that it “restructures our thinking about reality by replacing the commonsense notion of ‘thing’ (as something that has a history and has external connections with other things) with notions of ‘process’ (which contain its history and possible futures) and ‘relation’ (which contains, as part of what it is, its ties with other relations)” (Tyner et al. 2014, p 905-906); in this way one can treat the concept of violence as an abstraction, which allows us to understand the “work” that this concept does (in terms of the phenomena it highlights as well as those it occludes). What I want to suggest here is that this way of thinking has clear relevance for discussions of “racism” and “racial injustice.” Tyner et al. (2014, p 907) state that to “argue that violence is an abstraction is to argue against an essentialized, normalized, and naturalized violence; it calls attention to the political contestation of what is abstracted as violence—and

who has the authority to decide.” This is precisely the approach that is needed to understand how the concept of “racism” is deployed in scholarship and in public discourse – what is at stake here is the determination of what counts as “racism” and how our geographical imaginations (shaped by discourses such as southering) influence how we decide what to call “racism” and where and how we look for it.

CONCLUSION

This article is an attempt to stimulate a discussion about the ways in which scholars may reproduce the discourse of southering in the process of critiquing injustice in the southeastern states. It argues that such risks are in part due to the very structure of southering as an internal orientalist discourse, in the sense that statements about “the South” may be understood as implying either that the rest of the country is free from the problems being discussed or that the problem is inherent in the social fabric of “the South” to an extent that is not true of other parts of the U.S. In other words, enthymemes, or basic assumptions of the analysis (e.g. “Southern” distinctiveness), may be attributed by the reader to a text even when such assumptions are not actually shared by the author. The article has pointed to the problems with making explicit and unsubstantiated comparisons on issues such as racism between the “South”

[END PAGE 145]

and “North” and has highlighted discursive forms that risk triggering enthymemes that are inconsistent with the intentions of the author. The article ended by considering a few strategies for minimizing the communication of the wrong messages, including being more specific regarding temporal and spatial boundaries, using a form of the contrapuntal method where generalizations about “the South” are accompanied by statements describing the status of the

problem in question in the rest of the country, employing a materialist definition of racism as well as a dialectical analysis that focuses on process and relation.

It is important to point out that for precisely the same reasons that representations of “the South” inform “American” identity, *critiques* of southering may have the unintended consequence of suggesting a “defense” of “the South.” This was a problem that Said in fact faced himself, as many readers took him to be defending a “true” Islam or Orient and justifying problematic forms of nationalist resistance (Thornton 2007). With regard to the U.S. context, to the extent that “complaints concerning antisouthern stereotypes have [historically] coincided with the denial of the region’s worst problems” (Duck 2006, p 2), this is a serious problem for a clear-eyed understanding of southering and internal orientalism as a whole. This means that I must be very clear that the point of the critique of southering is *not* to direct attention away from “Southern” injustices, but rather to *increase* the total attention to injustices in the U.S. by showing how an unreflective discourse about social justice in “the South” can in fact hinder the pursuit of social justice outside the region. Efforts to improve social justice in the southeastern states should be ongoing, as there is much work to be done. But that is true of the entire U.S., and the way that we talk about such efforts matters.

I have discussed above possible psychological explanations for why we as scholars might be inclined to believe in, and even *desire*, “Southern” distinctiveness. We can also consider institutional forces, such as how our scholarly fields are organized. For example, as Duck (2006, p 9) points out, the field of southern studies has focused on “issues of enduring regional distinctiveness,” and indeed, the very logic of having a field called “southern studies” is based on a fundamental assumption of distinctiveness. Without this assumption, the field lacks a *raison d’être*. The same might be said of journals such as *Southeastern Geographer*, and bodies such as

the Study of the American South Specialty Group of the AAG. To what extent does the very existence of such organs depend on, and reinforce, southering? The motivation for raising this and related questions is not a pedantically “holier-than-thou” positioning, but rather a desire to instigate a critical discussion of the very theoretical, institutional, and even psychological foundations shaping the work we do. In other words, we need to try to avoid letting southering establish the boundaries of our investigations and shape our analytical perspective. Painter (1994, p 106) refers to this as “a renunciation of a ‘the South’ way of thinking.”

Said (2000, p 201-202) was on the same track when he argued, “So saturated with meanings, so overdetermined by history, religion and politics are labels like ‘Arab’ or ‘Muslim’ as subdivisions of ‘The Orient’ that no one today can use them without some attention to the formidable polemical mediations that screen the objects, if they exist at all, that the labels designate.” Similarly, one must be aware

[END PAGE 146]

of the “formidable polemical mediations” that screen considerations of the southeastern states. The utility of the concept “the South” as an explanatory force or a useful description of social reality must be seriously reconsidered.

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¹ As Baker and Nelson (2001, p 231) put it (partly in jest), “Every time a shocking act of racist violence occurs in New York, Illinois, or Pennsylvania, you can bet another movie on Mississippi will appear within six months.”

² See the related discussion in Jansson (2005b).

³ See, for example, Theoharis (2003b), Biondi (2003), and Sugrue (2008).

⁴ It is worth noting that King also said “I’ve never seen anything like it...I have never seen – even in Mississippi or Alabama – mobs as hostile and hate-filled as I’ve seen in Chicago” (Gerstle 1995, p 583).