

Anthony Dyer Hoefer. *Apocalypse South: Judgment, Cataclysm, and Resistance in the Regional Imaginary.* Literature, Religion, and Postsecular Studies Series. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2012. viii + 188 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8142-1201-1; \$14.95 (cd-rom), ISBN 978-0-8142-9303-4.



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The Book(s) of Revelation

Anthony Dyer Hoefer offers us this startling premise: the South is always already at a moment of sublime, often cataclysmic transformation (p. 7). In its cultural and critical output, the South hinges on rupture, change, and dramatic revelation. The apocalypse, for Hoefer, has long dominated the region's identity and narratives, and it is this religiously informed notion that he unravels and illuminates in *Apocalypse South*. This excellent book places southern religion at the center of literary scholarship, but through a very particular mode and narrative. In this sense, Hoefer's work is much-needed in southern studies, not least for its fusion of interpretative modes and insistence on reading for the apocalypse (long un-noted in this field). Hoefer's book begins with the insight that catastrophic consequences are ascribed to violations of the boundaries of race, class, gender, family, community, region and nation but at the same time this apocalyptic imaginary is a reservoir of hope: through it, deliverance from injustices and worldly suffering remains possible (p. 4). With this lens, Hoefer looks to William Faulkner's *Light in August* (1932), Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's*

Children (1938), two fictions from Randall Kenan, and Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992).

Hoefer's theoretical strategy of *Apocalypse South* untangles three principle conceptions: firstly, he investigates the histories of southern religion, particularly evangelical Protestantism; secondly, he attempts to unravel the mechanics and social architectures of apocalyptic belief and understanding; and thirdly, in grounding these notions in the southern region, he explores how the two former categories intersect with ideas of place and space. Such longstanding debates about the region helpfully and specifically tie the debate of apocalypse to the South's geographical and cultural shape. Doing so, Hoefer aims to rectify some major absences and critical neglect in southern studies. Most important for him, the particular functions of southern apocalyptic discourse have been unattended; when religion has been noted, though, scholars have fallen into a reductive racial dichotomy, which is imposed on eschatological visions of evangelical Protestantism (p. 7). In other words, religion is usually understood along two limiting race-based theologi-

cal lines. One of Hoefer's central aims, then, is to blur such lines and open out religious thinking in the South: the apocalypse and apocalyptic thinking is a key way to do so.

The first half of the book charts the apocalyptic implications on racial demarcations and boundaries in the South in the early twentieth century. Here, Hoefer turns to Faulkner's *Light in August* and Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children*. *Light in August* is read by Hoefer as exploring how the logic of apocalyptic thinking reinforces racial division, informs the ritual violence of lynching, and is invoked to reassert the dominant social order in the face of the transformations of modernity (p. 24). Apocalyptic thinking in this novel is used by characters to avoid confronting the permeability of racial divisions and thus keep segregation airtight and strictly enforced (p. 34). One of the ways in which Faulkner explores the boundaries of race in this novel is through the act of lynching; the novel's end offers a grotesque and shocking example of southern violence. For Hoefer, reading lynching through apocalyptic thought helps us understand the novel's engagement with race, violence, and social borders. The theological authorization of lynching, he writes, is predicated upon the event as a singular Apocalypse—a retributive and cleansing expiation of a threat to community and an agent of evil that simply enacts a divine judgment that has always-already been made (p. 38). This insight alone into Faulkner's imaginative world expands the wealth of scholarship on lynching that has emerged in recent years.

Hoefer's reading of Wright shows, in a sense, the converse of this use of apocalypse as he illuminates how *Uncle Tom's Children* is concerned with the apocalyptic imaginary of black religion and how this offers the possibility of *rupture*, of a radical break and totalizing apocalyptic rendering of an oppressive social order (p. 63). Through recourse to various stories in the collection, Hoefer examines the ways in which *Uncle Tom's Children* works to restore the colonized, brutalized black subject into a meaningful teleology: a contrary move to that demonstrated by the characters in Faulkner's novel. To do this, Hoefer shows how the collection's cyclical structure casts the black experience in a typology drawn from Scripture, which in turn demands that the ... characters experience multiple ruptures in time (which are usually violent) (p. 65). What these beatings, lynchings, and murders offer, however, are not examples, as in Faulkner, of racial boundaries being solidified and demarcated, but possibilities of revelation and rebirth (p. 66). Hoefer's discussion of Wright ends with an im-

portant understanding of the apocalyptic imaginary: it allows us to revise and rewrite our endings and, thus, to direct events and experiences toward a new telos. Moreover, it is discursive space open to possibilities denied by conventional systems of meaning (p. 98). This imaginary can be necessary and dynamic.

Where the first part of the book looks to racial boundaries in the South of the early twentieth century, the second part looks to late twentieth-century texts to examine apocalyptic discourse in the maintenance of gender and sexuality boundaries. Here, Hoefer reads Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989) and the short story "Let the Dead Bury Their Dead" (1993), in addition to Allison's novel *Bastard Out of Carolina*. Kenan's fiction, like that of Faulkner, is shown by Hoefer to explore the creeping expiration of a community with the possibility of violent eruption within it (p. 102). Place, gender, and sexuality are investigated here, but more could have been made of Kenan's queer literary strategies; while his status as black gay writer is noted, the significance of queer writing within the South is not unraveled as much as it could be (this goes, too, for the discussion of Allison). Nonetheless, Hoefer pays attention to how apocalypse functions to contain and conceal histories that would trouble the stability of family and community (p. 104). These repressions and silences, however, are obscurely legible through the apocalyptic imaginary. If apocalypse becomes a space where the unspeakable can be addressed indirectly and where contradiction is negotiated through deferral to a cosmological myth, then these narratives needed attending to. As Hoefer writes, "Apocalypse is our site of excavation" (p. 129).

Similarly, for Allison, the apocalyptic imaginary provides an alternative discursive space, open to possibilities beyond those offered by the dominant spatial and platial discourses (p. 133). This expansiveness of the apocalyptic is important in the South not only because it is itself a marginal place, but also because it contains many particular marginal voices. Poor whites, in particular, have long sought a space in the South to speak and live; fictional depictions of this stretch back through Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor as well as to less canonical writers like Erskine Caldwell. Allison joins such company, exploring life for white trash communities. In this novel, her poor female protagonist is abused, ostracized, and marginalized: she is a throwaway body that Patricia Yaeger has so eloquently detailed. However, the character of Bone engages with the apocalyptic imaginary, letting its visions and rhetoric define her imagination and fantasies. The possibilities enabled by

this provide narrative coherence to her story through its opening of alternate social spaces which mirrors Allison's use of it too: the landscape of the South refuses to be located along its aberrant margins (p. 133). In all, Hoefer argues, by invoking the southern apocalyptic imaginary, Allison lays her own affirmative claim to her native ground, demanding that Bone's story and her story be included, not along the aberrant margins of the South, but fully within it (p. 152). The apocalyptic South thus is a sign of, and tool for, radical change.

In this way, the apocalypse is again a rich site of study and exploration, enabling southerners to unburden themselves and their region, transforming and rupturing identity, all the while understanding its formative powers. Apocalypse, then, is surely a necessary component of understanding southern literature today: it must be installed in our already-growing catalogue of ways to talk about the region. This brings me to what I consider the book's first limitation, however. While the readings of Faulkner, Wright, Kenan, and Allison are astute and thorough, these texts have been commented on so frequently and exhaustively in criticism (southern or otherwise)—save, perhaps for Kenan—that Hoefer's religiously informed insights do not always enlighten the texts as much as I would hope. Perhaps this is unfair considering the originality of his apocalyptic intervention into contemporary southern scholarship, which has been sorely overdue. However, the canonicity of *Light in August* and *Uncle Tom's Children* alone made me wish for Hoefer to chart his argument through unexpected or more marginal texts.

Mississippi Quarterly's summer/fall 2011 volume has two striking and original essays on Faulkner's novel that, in some senses, outstrip Hoefer's apocalyptic reading. Nathan Tipton's "Rope and Faggot" alone unpacks the homoerotics of lynching in the novel, charting a fresh scholarly angle on this already heavily analyzed text.[1] Hoefer's analysis of it, in the end, tells us that *Light in August* does not chart a path toward meaningful historical progress, revelation, or deliverance, instead "feint[ing] toward its possibility" all the while remaining "deeply skeptical" (p. 60). This reading, while highly interesting, does not—for me at least—shatter our conventional understanding of the novel, but merely complements it. Similarly, the discussion of *Bastard Out of Carolina* ends with the point that Allison activates the regional and the particular as vehicle for liberation rather than as a mechanism to resist change (p. 153). Again, while Hoefer is insightful here, work on Allison's novel from the angle of queer studies or trauma studies has

engendered more challenging and original conclusions (Laura Di Prete and Leigh Gilmore are but two examples of this). I do not wish to undervalue Hoefer's contribution to the ever-expanding world of southern studies, but I cannot help but think what other less canonical novels (in the academy at least) might be explored in this critical frame. What might emerge from reading Ron Rash or Olympia Vernon with the apocalypse in mind? This is less a critique, then, than a call for further analysis.

In this way, Hoefer's conclusion moves away from literary texts to a historical event: Hurricane Katrina. Revealing how apocalypse functioned in the aftermath of the storm—indeed, he writes, "in no time in recent years has the landscape of the apocalyptic imaginary come so close to materiality in the South as it did in the Crescent City in late 2005" (p. 156)—Hoefer brings some of his thematic strands together here, while also opening out his thinking from literature to the larger cultural landscape of the region. In plotting Hurricane Katrina into this narrative, Hoefer joins other academics, such as Katherine Henninger and Anna Hartnell, who talk about the storm and its effects within their larger schemas of race and region. Hoefer untangles this story further, suggesting that in some of the public discussions of the storm (which argued that Katrina was punishment for the city's supposed embrace of "licentious and excessive behavior") apocalypse is deployed to particular political ends. The sufferings of Katrina, in this model, "seem not the consequence of any policy, but rather, the fault of an aberrant few who must be pushed to the nation's margins" (p. 160). Hoefer thus reveals to us the ongoing ways in which the South is forever on the brink of apocalypse: on the edge of rupture.

It is here, then, that I signal another limitation of *Apocalypse South*; this is not a criticism in itself, but merely a suggestion for further scholarship. In reading so precisely and extensively the apocalyptic potential of the South, I wonder why Hoefer does not—if only in conclusion—gesture toward the genre that effectively follows it: the postapocalyptic. Southern fiction and film has embraced this mode in recent times, with texts such as AMC's television series *The Walking Dead*, Victor Gischler's *Go Go Girls of the Apocalypse* (2008), and most notably, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2007). It is McCarthy's text that I want to end on, as it, I think, might offer a coda to Hoefer's text that is sorely missing. If Hoefer finally argues, the apocalyptic vision offers hope, but it does not suggest that we passively wait for deliverance; instead, we need to do "persistent interpretative work": reading "signs of these times, as well as those

of the past, in order to bring into the realm of visibility those things that other narratives concealâ (pp. 170-171), then McCarthyâs novel requires precisely such an analytic effort. In its emphasis on the postapocalyptic-on life after rupture-*The Road* presents a southern region that is fractured, devastated, and near-obliterated: âEverything uncoupled from its shoring. Unsupported in the ashen air.â[2] Nonetheless, regional geography and memory continue to bear their traces on the novelâs landscape which need our âpersistent interpretative work.â With possible deliverance afforded by the apocalypse, Hoeferâs sights might also be set toward the re-

gion *after* catastrophe, when âjudgment, cataclysm and resistanceâ define a new regional imaginary.

Note

[1]. Nathan Tipton, âRope and Faggot: The Homoerotics of Lynching in William Faulknerâs *Light in August*,â *Mississippi Quarterly* 64, nos. 3-4 (Summer/Fall 2011); and Randall Wilhelm, âFraming Joe Christmas: Vision and Detection in *Light in August*,â in *ibid*.

[2]. Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (London: Picador, 2007), 10.

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