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The Real Places That Gave Rise to Southern Fictions

Tema Stauffer's photographs explore how the experience of going somewhere is shaped by your expectations of what you will find.

By Casey Cep | January 12, 2022

Red Clay Road, Perdue Hill, Alabama, 2019 Photographs by Tema Stauffer

There is a cheap way of invoking the American South—common to country songs and television shows and pulpy novels—that involves setting the scene with cornfields or battlefields and setting the table with gravy and grits. You know that you're in the midst of it when an otherwise deracinated character drops his final "G"s and says something about livin' high on the hog or complains about how it's colder outside than a witch's tit. But it takes more than kudzu or a Mason jar to make a work of Southern fiction. A real sense of place requires something else—more verb than noun, not a thing but a way of being.

Church, Highway 47, Alabama, 2018

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Abandoned House, William Faulkner Memorial Highway, Mississippi, 2020

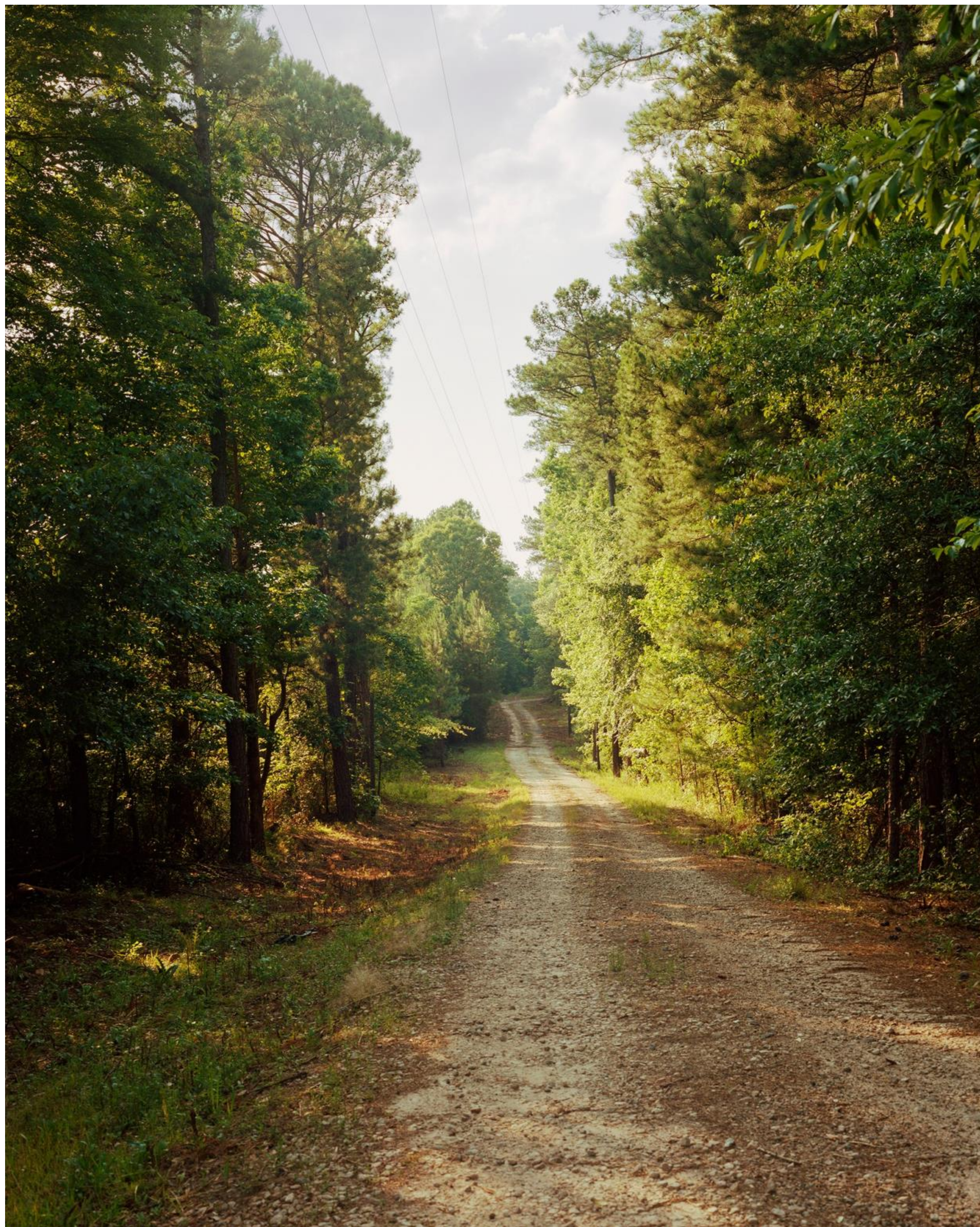
Rocking Chair, Sparta, Georgia, 2018

And yet some of those Southern nouns! Church, river, cotton—they shake the soul, cleanse the spirit, and line the roadsides. It is difficult to imagine William Faulkner without the rising waters of the Yoknapatawpha River, or Jesmyn Ward without the deep currents of the Wolf River. There would be no plot if not for the twenty-seven wagons full of cotton that Silva Vicarro needs separated in Tennessee Williams's play, and no plot twist if not for the gin that tore up Tom Robinson's arm in Harper Lee's "To Kill a Mockingbird." The gossip-filled, gospel-free church ladies in the stories of Alice Walker and Eudora Welty are the very sort that drove Hazel Motes to found the Holy Church of Christ Without Christ in Flannery O'Connor's "Wise Blood."

It is this kind of heftier noun which Tema Stauffer takes for her subject in "Southern Fiction," a visual survey of the settings that shaped the imaginations of some of the last century's most

significant Southern writers. Stauffer's pictures are not illustrations of particular literary works or portraits of individual writers but, rather, invocations of people and places, both real and imagined. Taken together, they capture the intellectual and aesthetic challenges posed by biography, but also by geography—and specifically by the American South.

William Faulkner's Kitchen Curtains, Rowan Oak, Oxford, Mississippi, 2018



Driveway, Wards Chapel Road, Eatonton, Georgia, 2020

Eudora Welty's Kitchen, Jackson, Mississippi, 2020

Stauffer's own biography begins in North Carolina, where she was born but not raised. She grew up in the Midwest and studied photography there before moving to New York City and publishing the book "Upstate," which rendered beautiful and specific the notions of decay and revalitzation so often glibly used to describe former industrial cities like Hudson, New York. Eventually, she moved back to North Carolina, after taking a job at East Tennessee State University. Her earliest memories of the South are not her own but borrowed from the novels of Carson McCullers and Truman Capote and the photographs of Walker Evans and William Christenberry.

Cooper's Gro, Powelton, Georgia, 2020

Part of what interests Stauffer is how you can know a place before you have ever been there, and how the experience of going there is shaped by your expectations of what you will find. This shadow South, the one that exists in our collective imagination, was much on her mind four years

ago, as she started thinking about the pictures that would become "Southern Fiction" and went looking for what, in many ways, she had already seen. In Mississippi, she returned to Eudora Welty's kitchen in Jackson, nearly forty years after William Eggleston had already photographed it; she shot a church in the tiny town of Rodney, where Welty herself had once taken pictures while working for the W.P.A.; and she captured the motel sign in the city of Canton, where Hollywood comes calling when it needs to set a film in "the South," everything from "A Time to Kill" to "O Brother, Where Art Thou?"

Anderson Cotton Gin, Clarksdale, Mississippi, 2020

This part of the country has the look of a place that has been looked at, not always with accuracy or charity. These are the other kind of fictions which the series confronts: the kind of lies told about the South by those who live there, and the other kind of lies told by those who do not. In Stauffer's

work, however, homespun magnolia myths and wisteria fables are unravelled—for instance, by a cold, crisp picture of the Standard Oil gas station where the civil-rights activist Samuel Leamon Younge, Jr., was murdered in Tuskegee, Alabama—whereas the foreign finger-pointing conviction that the whole South's history is whitewashed is likewise undone, including by a pastel-perfect picture of the boycott mural in Port Gibson, Mississippi.

Mural Commemorating the 1966 Port Gibson Boycott Led by the NAACP, Port Gibson, Mississippi, 2020

As for the lies told by artists: Stauffer considers those, too. For every dilapidated grocery store or rustic farm stand that has been depicted exploitatively or sentimentally by other photographers, Stauffer's images playfully indict the appetite for poverty and delight in podunk that so many people bring to any place south of the Mason-Dixon Line. In her picture of Richard Wright's childhood home, for example, the ostensible subject of the photograph is half visible, but fully

pristine and carefully maintained by the family who now live there. The image centers instead the bleak house next door, with its sagging bricks, peeling paint, and torn roof, effectively gesturing to the poverty of Wright's upbringing while simultaneously forcing viewers to look hard at their own assumptions about Black homeownership, in Natchez or anywhere else.

East Woodlawn Avenue where Richard Wright Grew Up, Natchez, Mississippi, 2020

Stauffer knows that literal landmarks, such as birthplaces and home places, are both necessary and often inadequate for the thorny task of understanding someone else's life. Her pictures of Faulkner's kitchen and Welty's library are mimetic of visiting these homes, but visiting the houses of writers is a bit like visiting their graves: they are everywhere, and yet nowhere to be found. Facts abound in such spaces, but meaning is rarely intrinsic. Whether you are visiting in person or looking at a photograph, what you make of what you see most often comes from what you read

beforehand or learn afterward. Eudora Welty's book collection may well reveal more about her character than William Faulkner's can opener, but the picture of his daughter Jill's room, with gauzy white curtains and a trio of rocking chairs, obscures a complicated relationship. No one would ever infer from it, for instance, what she remembered her volatile and heavy-drinking father once telling her: "No one remembers Shakespeare's child."

Jill's Room, Rowan Oak, Oxford, Mississippi, 2020

In truth, "Jill's Room," like most of the places that Stauffer has photographed, is identifiable only by its title. The beauty of these images is in their relationship not just to a specific writer but more broadly to the region at large, rousing pathos and pity through the weight of iconic nouns. Careful study might result in noticing "Walker" on the headstones in one picture, revealing what the title observes: that this is the cemetery of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, where Alice Walker

was baptized and where her ancestors are buried. The handsome church has starched-white clapboard siding as weathered as the wreaths on the graves nearby, and sits on cinder blocks, as if it were standing on its tippy-toes, trying to get closer to heaven, like everyone inside. But without the headstones Wards Chapel could be any other country church, just as the red dirt road in Harper Lee's Monroe County could be a red dirt road anywhere in Alabama, or anywhere else without most literary tourists being any the wiser.

Even so, titles cannot say everything there is to be said about any of these places. Two other bedrooms in the series demonstrate this point profoundly: "Civil Rights Activist Medgar Evers's Bedroom, Jackson, Mississippi" and "Eudora Welty's Bedroom, Jackson, Mississippi." Welty lived in hers for nearly eighty years, whereas Evers was only thirty-seven when he was shot dead outside his by a white supremacist. No photograph alone can tell you that they are forever linked by the short story she wrote on the night of his murder, a first-person nightmare in the voice of his murderer.

Civil Rights Leader Medgar Evers's Bedroom, Jackson, Mississippi, 2020

Sometimes, as in that case, there is a real referent for something we know from a work of art. But even in such cases there's slippage: the mere fact of Evers's murder does not of its own accord yield up "Where Is the Voice Coming From?" And often there's no literal corollary at all. You cannot photograph the Yoknapatawpha River, because it does not exist. That's why Stauffer photographed the Little Tallahatchie River on the William Faulkner Memorial Highway that connects the town where the author was born, New Albany, with Oxford, the town where he lived in his beloved estate, Rowan Oak. The real river is a symbol of the fictional one, which was itself once a symbol of the real; such reversals are the fate of any landscape that becomes famous for its fictional iterations.

River, William Faulkner Memorial Highway, Mississippi, 2020

The American South is one such region, a place where it is easy to shift between fiction and reality—sometimes on purpose, sometimes accidentally. It is also, and not unrelatedly, a place where it is easy to shift between the present and the past. All regionalism is inherently at least a little nostalgic; no part of the world is static, yet the things we think of as making a given place distinctive tend to remain the same—markers of a region as it once was, or, more often, as some imagine it once was in an allegedly purer, less corrupt past. Such thinking can be particularly pernicious in the American South, where fantasies about the region's history overlook the brutal realities of slavery and segregation. "Southern Fiction" is compelling because it manages to pay homage to the distinctiveness of the South while also being honest about its past and its present. Rather than simply participating in this nostalgia, Stauffer effectively conveys the relationship between how the region looks in the mind and how it looks in the world.

Silver Car, Elraine Subdivision, Jackson, Mississippi, 2020

Fruit Stand, Highway 441, Georgia, 2018

Bill Will Motel Sign, Canton, Mississippi, 2019

So here is another noun: mimosa, as in the mimosa tree. The one in Stauffer's book grows on the side of a highway in Georgia, though I watch one bloom each year in my own front yard, a few hundred miles away. Both my tree and this one are the generic foliage of Anywhere, America, not so unlike the hotel chains and fast-food chains and box-store chains that have also come to line every highway in every state, making same and plain what was once distinct and diverse.

Mimosa Branches, Sparta Highway, Georgia, 2018

Yet the mimosa is lovely, even whimsical. At night and whenever it rains, it closes its leaves; every spring, it bursts with bright-pink inflorescences that look like dandelions, if dandelions could dye their hair and get perms. A native of Asia, its genus honors the name of the Italian nobleman who brought it to Europe; its species name is a corruption of the Persian for "silk flower." The mimosa is a world traveller that has stuck around for so long it now passes for a Southern belle, and its inclusion in "Southern Fiction" is telling, a shibboleth of sorts for those who know how it hides in its specific sense of place a more cosmopolitan story. Being trapped in the past may cause us to miss what is lovely in the present or will be in the future. The photograph of the tree is aesthetically beautiful but intellectually impish, embodying as it does the paradox of regionalism: every place is special and yet every place is increasingly the same.

Mount Zion No. 1 Baptist Church, Rodney, Mississippi, 2020