I'll Take My Land: Contemporary Southern Agrarians

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Abstract
For many earlier southern white writers, the southern rural landscape was the repository of nostalgia for lost ways of life, whether it was the plantation fantasy that Thomas Nelson Page pined for in his stories *In Ole Virginia* (1887) or the segregated agrarian ideal that many contributors yearned for in *I'll Take My Stand* (1930). For modern southern white writers, beginning most prominently with William Faulkner, the rural landscape has conjured up unsettling guile about a way of life that flourished on the backs of the black people who tilled that land. And not surprisingly, for many black writers the southern rural landscape has been the repository of troubled memories—"slavery's old backyard," as Eddy Harris terms it in *South of Haunted Dreams* (1993). African American writers such as Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison started their lives and their plots in the rural South and then fled its racism. During the Harlem Renaissance, writers such as Jean Toomer and Zora Neale Hurston found the rural South to be a storehouse of African American culture, a culture that Hurston's anthropology professor Franz Boaz thought might be lost during the Great Migration of blacks from the South, a culture that she reclaimed. Many contemporary African American writers, no matter their region of origin, have found that at some time in their writing lives they must go South in their fiction to understand their history, to confront old enemies, and to heal old wounds. For writers not native to the South, the turn South is often made in historical fictions recounting slavery or segregation--Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*, and Bebe Moore Campbell's *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine*. In David Bradley's *The Chaneyville Incident*, Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, and Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, contemporary characters delve into their ancestors' southern rural past in order to understand their racial heritage.

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