

8-1995

Narrating the New South

Edward L. Ayers

University of Richmond, eayers@richmond.eduFollow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/history-faculty-publications>Part of the [Rhetoric Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ayers, Edward L. "Narrating the New South." *Journal Of Southern History* 61, no. 3 (August 1995): 555.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the History at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

Narrating the New South

By EDWARD L. AYERS

MY BOOK, *The Promise of the New South*, WAS INTENDED AS SOMETHING of an experiment with narrative. While some reviewers thought the experiment worked well enough, others disagreed. In the eyes of such critics, my book was underdeveloped and noncommittal, refusing to say what it really meant and refusing to cast itself as an alternative to other interpretations. Howard N. Rabinowitz, writing in this journal, saw symptoms of a deeper malady in the book, a case of “post-structuralism.” Given these criticisms, I thought that perhaps a word of explanation would be useful, describing the intentions, if not necessarily the accomplishments, of *Promise*.¹

One way to describe the idea behind *Promise* is to suggest a distinction between “fixed narratives” and “open narratives.” Most works of professional history mix, in various proportions, nineteenth-century styles of storytelling with twentieth-century forms of social science. These fixed narratives tend to be organized in a linear way, either chronologically or in the form of an argument, seeking balance and authority. Though history writing is not as formalized as, say, sociology or political science, historians do rely on introductions, chapter summaries, and conclusions, do expect arguments to be clearly labeled as such, and do ask that works be positioned in relation to other studies. Most works of history are implicitly and explicitly measured against this standard of the fixed narrative, tailored to an audience of students and professors, effectively designed for historiographical utility.

Open narratives challenge various parts of that formula. In some open histories the authors let the reader in on the way the argument is being constructed; rather than presenting history as a self-contained

¹ Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York and Oxford, 1992); and Howard N. Rabinowitz, “The Origins of a Poststructural New South: A Review of Edward L. Ayers’s *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction*,” *Journal of Southern History*, LIX (August 1993), 505–15. I am grateful to John Boles for the invitation to write this essay and to the *Journal*’s anonymous referees for their helpful comments. I also appreciate the suggestions from Brian Balogh, Brooks Barnes, Rebecca Edwards, Bruce Fort, Scot French, Paul Gaston, Peter Kastor, Anne Rubin, Phillip Troutman, and Rob Weise.

MR. AYERS is a professor of history at the University of Virginia.

and authoritative argument, these historians openly grapple with problematic sources and presentation. Their narratives suggest that the appearance of coherence and a commanding argument may ultimately be less useful than a reckoning with the limits of our knowledge or understanding. Other open histories ask storytelling and language to do more work. Instead of using the narrative as a means to an analytical end outside the story, these histories attempt to fold the analysis into the story itself. They do not simply relate facts or lay out a chronicle—they analyze their topics and make arguments, but not in ways that obviously segregate judgment from storytelling. These open histories may intentionally leave ambiguities unresolved or seek tension and resolution less in professional debate than in evidence, characters, and situations.²

Most of our books, of course, range along a continuum somewhere between fixed and open narratives. There is no need to force books into one camp or another. It is impossible to write a perfectly fixed nar-

² In the field of southern history, a number of books that might be considered open in various ways have been published over the last fifteen years or so, pioneered by Rhys Isaac's *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790* (Chapel Hill, 1982). Other examples of what I take to be, for various reasons, open narratives include Michael P. Johnson and James L. Roark, *Black Masters: A Free Family of Color in the Old South* (New York and London, 1984); Suzanne Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784–1860* (New York and London, 1984); Theodore Rosengarten, *Tombee: Portrait of a Cotton Planter* (New York, 1986); Allen Tullos, *Habits of Industry: White Culture and the Transformation of the Carolina Piedmont* (Chapel Hill and London, 1989); Melton Alonza McLaurin, *Celia, A Slave* (Athens, Ga., 1991); Winthrop D. Jordan, *Tumult and Silence at Second Creek: An Inquiry into a Civil War Slave Conspiracy* (Baton Rouge and London, 1993); and James Goodman, *Stories of Scottsboro* (New York, 1994). None of these authors has been asked to endorse the views put forward in this paper, which focuses on motives that I infer from their books. Notice that “open” does not mean “inclusive”; there have been many social histories of the South that include a wide range of people and evidence that speak from a relatively “fixed” point of view. As the remainder of this essay suggests, I do not intend that as a criticism. Each experimental narrative is open in a different way. Taking his cue from the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, for example, Rhys Isaac dwells on the way that ritual, landscape, and presentation of self dramatized the deep structures of power in colonial Virginia. For Isaac, history is not so much a stream from one event to another as it is a series of juxtapositions, a series of “resonances” created among simultaneous processes. His narrative takes the form of a series of tableaux vivants, of dramas played out by actors half-conscious of their roles. The narratives of Lebsock, Rosengarten, McLaurin, and Jordan, on the other hand, focus on close interpretations of ambiguous documents, piecing together motive and consequence. The haunting story of black masters told by Johnson and Roark begins with a box of old letters found under a porch; the narrative continually calls attention to the inferences made from those letters, the things left unsaid in the record. In Allen Tullos's book, in some ways the boldest of the open narratives, one chapter consists almost entirely of an uninterrupted and uninterpreted transcript of a woman's oral account of her life. Goodman's history of Scottsboro calls attention to the margins of the story, to the long days in prison and on parole, as well as to public events. His very title stresses that “Scottsboro” was not so much one story as many, not so much a single event as the intersection of disparate lives. I discuss Goodman's open narratives in “Prisms and Prisons,” *New Republic*, CCXI (July 11, 1994), 36–38.

rative; slippery language and evidence see to that. It is equally impossible to write a perfectly open narrative, for we write and read books precisely to find coherence of some kind. Different tasks call for different kinds of narratives. Anyone who opens an encyclopedia or dictionary does not want to find contingency and uncertainty; someone who wants a broadly inclusive portrayal of a time or place may expect to find pieces that do not fit together snugly.

I tried to combine open and fixed narratives in *Promise* precisely because each kind of writing does things the other does not do as well. The book's broad introductory chapter, "Junction," is relatively open, for example, because it tries to create a sense of diverse but interconnected activity. The detailed and chronological story of Populism, on the other hand, follows a relatively fixed form because a political movement unfolds specifically in time, with clear events and contingencies creating its shape. Other chapters of *Promise* follow intermediate strategies, though open-ended chapters and a sort of anti-epilogue have made some readers feel as if the whole book rejects closure.

It was not sheer perversity or a quest for novelty that impelled me to experiment with narrative, but rather an attempt to balance two competing goals. I hoped, on the one hand, that my book would appeal to people who knew little and perhaps cared less about the New South; on the other hand, I wanted to synthesize the large professional literature on the period. Toward the first end, I tried to make my narrative self-contained, dependent on no previous academic knowledge, its historiographic ropes and pulleys hidden. I tried to make the various parts of the story connect with one another in ways that were not announced. I tried to embody thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in individuals and dramatize them in action. I tried to use resonance and dissonance, things implied and suggested, to make the story more interesting and supple. These strategies reflect my admiration for the open styles of John Dos Passos and James Agee, the fine texture of histories such as Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou*.

Toward the second goal, of dealing with the historiography, I refused to build the story around the familiar and rather tired debates over continuity and discontinuity, the timing of segregation, or the colonial economy. Instead, I tried to portray the New South in a way that embraced rather than suppressed complexity and contradiction, that gave us some new material to think about, and that arranged the story in a way that challenged our usual perceptions. I carried on his-

torigraphical conversations in the notes and tables, trusting my fellow historians to see what I was doing in the main narrative.³

Not everyone approved of such experimentation. Professor Rabinowitz, for example, accused me of “settl[ing] for” literary criticism’s much-denounced “deconstruct[ion].” Casually noting that “no one really agrees on what the term means” anyway, Rabinowitz declared my book “poststructural.” He likened my approach to “New Age channeling” and put words such as *reality*, *good*, *bad*, and *meaning* inside quotation marks, imagining that I challenged the validity of such concepts. My narrative squandered respectable research, he concluded, though others might profitably mine it for lectures.⁴

There are indeed affinities between open narratives and the forms of thought generally called poststructural. But Rabinowitz, in his rush to categorize, ignored the influences I explicitly listed and invoked others—such as Michel Foucault—with whom I gave no indication of sympathy. The first thinker I credited in the introduction to *Promise*, and the most important of them, was William James, an American pragmatist and a contemporary of the period of southern history that I recounted. I sought to emulate James’s insistence on the multiplicity and complexity of everyday experience, his focus on the individual, and his tone of empathy and respect for beliefs he did not share. My inspirations also included Rhys Isaac, Greg Dening, Eric Wolf, Raymond Williams, Pierre Bourdieu, Johannes Fabian, and Mikhail Bakhtin, theorists who have insisted on taking people “without history” seriously. To that end, these historians, historical anthropologists, and literary critics have listened carefully for the nuances of action and speech, have found activity where others had seen passivity, and have historicized even the most stubborn of social structures.

These goals of inclusivity and activity are far from the moral relativism and epistemological nihilism that Rabinowitz means by “poststructural.” Indeed, in the tradition of pragmatism, *Promise* never de-

³ My strategy is akin to the search for the “reality effect” described (and critiqued) in F. R. Ankersmit, *The Reality Effect in the Writing of History: The Dynamics of Historiographical Topology* (Amsterdam, 1989). A balanced approach to the opportunities and dangers of innovative history that has many affinities with *Promise of the New South* appears in Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York and London, 1994). Two new books that get at some of the same points about the limitations of linear narratives are Michael André Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1994) and Gary Saul Morson, *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (New Haven, 1994).

⁴ Rabinowitz, “Origins of a Poststructural New South,” 507, 508, 509, 511, and 515 (quotations on first four pages cited).

nies our ability to find meanings on which we might profitably agree in the patterns of events and words. If anything, the book is what we might call "hyperempiricist," its complexity growing out of many facts and voices, not out of doubt about reality. I tried to make space for material that had not fit into more conventional narratives, combining everything from number crunching to the exegesis of novels. Unlike authors of other recent works of history, I did not put words into people's mouths or combine fiction with historical events. To the contrary, I did so much research precisely to avoid such ventriloquism and mind reading. I found that I had to turn to open narratives because the sharp edges of people and their ideas kept poking holes through the conceptual bags and boxes into which we have tried to cram them.

Though reviewers struck mainly by the form of my story have not always seen it, *Promise* has an overarching theme, even a thesis. Stated baldly, it would be something like this: the currents of industrial capitalism, the national state, and new cultural styles ran deeply throughout the New South. Those currents created, directly and indirectly, a complex series of backlashes, countercurrents, unexpected outcomes, and archaicisms. As a result, there were things going on simultaneously in the New South that appeared to have little to do with one another but that in fact sprang from a common source: the conflict between the economic, ideological, and cultural legacies of the slave South and those conveyed by the human and material carriers of late nineteenth-century modernity. The personal and public struggles involved in that multifarious conflict were more complicated than any of the categories that historians have devised to explain them.

Because it tells this morally complicated story, the narrative of *Promise* is built around contained tension, a tension signalled by the ambiguous and ironic title of the book itself. I might, it is true, have been able to boil the tensions down to a series of generalizations, but generalizations numb us to the very things the book is after: the emotional shadings of historical experience, the subtle and shifting contexts in which people had to make choices, the contradictory effects of the decisions people did make, the instability of even the most apparently permanent structures. *Promise* tried to evoke the New South by evoking the hard choices its people had to make, every day and in every facet of life, whether they wanted to or not. I intended a consonance between subject and style.

To write an open narrative is not to ignore or disdain prior work on the subjects it touches. History writing is a collaborative, cumulative enterprise, whether or not the entire story it tells is framed in terms of

historiographical contribution or argumentation. Professional debate plays an important role in clarifying our questions and directing our efforts; solving problems that we put to ourselves is a perfectly legitimate purpose for writing history. Anyone who reads my notes will see whom I learned from and where I stand on major issues; well over a hundred pages of *Promise* are devoted to notes and tables that address traditional concerns and themes. Because my interpretation focuses on the tensions and permutations of a slave society becoming a new hybrid society of indeterminate shape, it is true, I found something to agree with in most earlier interpretations though I found a model in none.

Promise, nevertheless, does differ with my predecessors not only about the overt content of their arguments but also about the assumptions behind their work. It is a gentle quarrel with some of my favorite books and historians. I try to undercut the notion of southerners as ideologically resistant to the market and pulled into it against their will; my southerners, black and white, want things and work mightily for them, even though they understand the high costs exacted by buying and selling. I challenge a view of the Populists as a new democratic culture; my Populists draw on the considerable strengths that they already possess. I see southern industrialization as a glass a quarter full, stressing that our habitual comparisons with the North obscure real change in the South and real opportunities for black men and white women. I cut against the picture of communal millworkers and coal miners; mine appear restless and open to the outside world. I admit the divisions within the black "community" and give Booker T. Washington the benefit of the doubt. I take New South religion seriously, on its own terms, not simply as a hegemonic force of cultural captivity. I portray southern music as more commercial than folk, southern literature as more modernist than reactionary, southern culture in general as innovative rather than as conservative. Generally, these are new, or at least controversial, emphases. While some readers have recognized these portrayals as forms of arguments, others seem to recognize and respect only overt disagreement.

I was often urged to make *Promise* a revisionist attack on the undisputed classic in the field, C. Vann Woodward's *Origins of the New South*, published in 1951. Unfortunately for any such intentions I may have held, the more I read Woodward's book the more I came to see *Origins* as a model of the historian's craft. The book's chapters interlock at several levels, including those of language, metaphor, and mood, making the narrative powerful and resistant to scholarly dis-

placement. It has no introduction and no conclusion; it does not define itself against any one historian but against an ingrained way of seeing the South; it often seems to work by indirection, aside, and allusion. In these ways, in fact, the book seemed something of an open narrative itself. William B. Hesseltine, reviewing Woodward's book in the *American Historical Review* in 1952, praised *Origins* for "wisely" refraining "from attempting to impose a nonexistent unity" upon the New South. An overview of the years from 1877 through 1913, Hesseltine argued, would not, could not, supply a "clearly defined synthesis" because those years were simply not "a coherent, unified period of southern history."⁵

Origins was "open" to the extent that it refused to follow a straightforward argument and to the extent that it was remarkably subtle and complex. But it was fixed in other important ways. Woodward—and the reader—watch over the New South from the viewpoint of omniscient observers. We are able to see through the guises and ruses of the New South leaders, able to see that the Populists should have stayed in the middle of the road, able to see that Booker T. Washington's compromise gave away far too much, able to see that philanthropists' gifts came with strings attached, able to see that religion and prohibition left the real problems unaddressed. We enjoy the sense of perspective, and a certain superiority, that comes from hindsight and from seeing things with Woodward's shrewd and ironic vision.

As Woodward recalls, "my interest was in discovering the character, identification, motives, and alliances of the leaders of the new order in the South." He wrote as an admirer of Charles Beard, seeing economic self-interest, reflected directly in political behavior, driving everything else. He advocated Beard's economic interpretation all the more fervently and self-consciously, Woodward tells us, to define himself against the emerging consensus history of the late 1940s and early 1950s. Given the assumptions of Beardianism, the historian's job is to peel away the layers of illusion—of legend, myth, deception, self-deception, bombast, wishful thinking, stereotype, and foolishness—to get at the reality underneath. For Woodward, that reality was the social, racial, and economic privilege created in the sordid Gilded Age and perpetuated in the decades afterward.⁶

⁵ C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877–1913* (Baton Rouge, 1951); William B. Hesseltine, review of *Origins of the New South*, *American Historical Review*, LVII (July 1952), 993–94.

⁶ C. Vann Woodward, *Thinking Back: The Perils of Writing History* (Baton Rouge and London, 1986), 55.

Such a view is very much from the top down, despite the obvious sympathy Woodward showed for the oppressed, black and white. The key protagonists for *Origins* are the Redeemers and their heirs, the Democrats who succeeded the Republicans of Reconstruction. They won power unfairly; they wielded it in favor of their own narrow interests and against those of the South as a whole; their blindness gave rise to a Populism that they then destroyed; they conspired with the former Populists to disfranchise and segregate black people and poorer whites. The Democrats are the active agents in every part of Woodward's story. The first 106 pages of *Origins*—nearly a fourth of those in the book—are devoted to getting the Redeemers on stage; many of the remaining pages are devoted to the Democrats' struggles with the Populists, their business dealings, and their cooptation of the progressives. The Democrats are central to *Origins* because Woodward's is essentially a story about political economy.

Woodward's focus on political leaders gives his story of the New South a narrative arc of status quo, challenge, and resolution that fits our expectations of a good story. The writing is beautiful, the arguments subtle, the qualifications carefully placed, but the basic explanation is that certain identifiable people called the shots, directed the society where they wanted it to go. The haves and have-nots were in struggle, with the rich white men who, as Woodward put it, pretty much "ran things" on the one hand and those "who were run, who were managed, and maneuvered and pushed around" on the other. It is, in part, the clarity of that struggle that makes the book so appealing, that gives the reader the sense of seeing through the Redeemers, of identifying with the oppressed.⁷

Promise does not seek to redeem the Redeemers nor to argue that the New South was better than Woodward believed. Where, then, do we differ? The basic issue seems to be this: I think that when the central drama of the society is located so firmly in Beardian political economy the other kinds of drama in the society are made to seem falsely peripheral by comparison. Many kinds of power operated in the New South, and they were not seamless and congruent. The planters ran their plantations but were neglected by the town-based politicians; politicians ran the state house but were sneered at by the railroad companies; preachers guided large congregations but were

⁷ Woodward to Virginia Durr, June 8, 1952, quoted in Morton Sosna, *In Search of the Silent South: Southern Liberals and the Race Issue* (New York, 1977), 11.

detested by many profane people; women supervised their households but could always be overruled by their husbands; rural merchants held their customers' futures in their hands but saw their own futures controlled by town-based wholesalers; white people assumed themselves superior to the blacks among whom they lived but blacks laughed at white pretension. *Promise* is about all these various kinds of power—some that operated by coercion, some that operated by persuasion. *Promise* does not ignore power but multiplies it, puts various kinds of power in competition with others. It is clear from the proportions of space I devote to public life—to voting, segregation, disfranchisement, and Populism, for example—that I do not consider all forms of power commensurable or interchangeable. But I do consider them all important.

Even on Woodward's own political turf, we differ. *Promise* pays as much attention to the attitudes and actions of the rank and file as to officeholders, as much attention to the anomalies and weaknesses of the political system as to its apparent successes. It tries to see why people would vote in ways that seem to us antithetical to their own interests, why they were so wedded to issues—such as prohibition—that seem to have little to do with the struggles over economy or race that we now see as central. In Woodward's account, the major changes in public life, segregation and disfranchisement, were largely partisan phenomena, the products of political manipulation imposed by well-placed leaders; in *Promise* they appear as social phenomena, systemic and deeply rooted, that politicians tried to harness and contain. For Woodward, segregation was mainly the result of displaced white frustration, a backlash. For *Promise*, statewide segregation was not that at all, but rather a halting and uncoordinated reaction to a series of profound changes in transportation, gender roles, and black class structure. I argue that disfranchisement had far less to do with the overt Populist challenge to the Redeemers than it did with black population movement, generational conflict, the growth of towns and cities, and the winner-take-all politics of the American Gilded Age. *Promise's* explanations branch out more than those of *Origins* because they try to describe social change that reverberated throughout the entire society.

In *Origins*, Populist leaders such as Tom Watson stand as testimony to the possibility that lived even in the New South; *Promise* takes this argument even farther, trying to show how social progress or human kindness did not depend on the decisions of the undependable men at the top. People of every walk of life in the South had their own

struggles with poverty, injustice, and prejudice that had nothing to do with the Redeemers. A society has many pressure points, many domains where people can make a difference. I do not think that the New South would have been a fundamentally different society if only the Populists had won—the promise that drives Woodward’s narrative—because the challenges that rural southerners confronted went much deeper than the political or even the credit system.

Some of my most insightful reviewers, such as Robert J. Norrell, have wondered whether the open and empathetic approach of *Promise* can help those who are concerned with “the continuing reality of poverty, racial hatred, and profound ignorance” of our region. In the eyes of such readers Woodward offers something I do not, an explanation that seems to be politically useful in a way mine is not. I understand why people say this: I do not offer clear blame or alternatives. *Promise* is not a focused, crusading book in the way that *Origins* or *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* are—though I often wished it could be. There are still plenty of southern politicians who deserve all the ridicule and anger that can be directed against them, still plenty of irresponsible corporations, still plenty of shallow boosters ready to give away their communities to anyone willing to put up a factory or chain store. Bitter histories of such people have been written, and written well, and we still need to put those people in perspective.⁸

But there are other stories that need telling, too, stories with their own political meaning. It is dangerous to let southern poverty and oppression be the entire story of the South. Told often enough, exclusively enough, such stories unintentionally flatten southerners, black and white, into stock figures, into simple victims and villains. Such stories have become common fare on television and in movies; they crowd out other possible stories, choking our understanding of the human richness created in southern history. A history book may tell horrendous stories of race and class domination, but jaded readers, young readers, will nod and turn the page. They have heard it all before.

The South has become a formula. The South and its people get to play only limited roles in the story of America; they are dragged into the textbooks and movie houses to demonstrate slavery, to cause the Civil War, to suffer in poverty, to inflict and partially overcome injustice. The result is a South that is easily pegged, easily caricatured, easily explained. That is an injustice, I came to believe, that a history

⁸ Robert J. Norrell, “The Way They Were,” *Virginia Quarterly Review*, LIX (Summer 1993), 551–55; and C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York, 1955).

book might actually do something, however small, to counter. *Promise*, in that sense, was meant to be politically engaged, even if I saw little use in discovering once more that southern planters, mill-owners, and politicians were often unjust. Woodward made that point powerfully forty years ago when he felt it needed to be impressed upon a readership lulled by southern boosterism and self-congratulation. What we needed when I wrote my book, I thought, were new ways, perhaps less familiar and direct ways, to let people reading about the South for the first time feel the shock and surprise of how deep the injustice ran—and how many people struggled in so many ways with and against that injustice.

Innovative social histories of the South have expanded the cast of characters in our stories. Millworkers, sharecroppers, dispossessed farmers, mountaineers, criminals, and apparently marginal people of all sorts now populate our histories. *Promise* attempted to carry this effort forward by also including not only categories of people who had been neglected, but also individuals who did not fit within the categories we have constructed. Moreover, the book pursues the democratizing and inclusive efforts of social history at the same time it recognizes self-defeating behavior or miscalculations within oppressed groups. I came to believe that romanticization was patronizing, that to hold only elites accountable for the course of southern history belied our efforts to write a truly democratic history. It is this insistence, I think, that makes *Promise* look apolitical to some readers, though my intention was to make the book more fully political.

Promise was written in what I take to be the spirit of Reinhold Niebuhr, the inspiration for the “irony” in Woodward’s famous series of essays that came after *Origins*. Niebuhr argued that all people are capable of both self-awareness and self-deception, are “children of light” and “children of darkness”; moral struggles are located *within* individuals as well as *between* them. I tried to evoke the way people of every sort wrestled with those forces within themselves, not only on the political stage, but in their families, in their churches, in their relations with neighbors of another skin color. Rather than merely denouncing long-dead politicians and planters, I tried to make readers feel by analogy our own complicity in social processes that are still going on, to strike notes that might resonate with our own lives. We might see ourselves reflected in those middle-class southerners and northerners who patronized the poor of both races so easily, who so easily explained injustice as the fault of rednecks and robberbarons, who sneered at the music and religion loved by millions, who saw the

South as a sort of alternately amusing and terrifying place removed a convenient distance from their own lives.⁹

Narratives such as the one I have tried to write, to be sure, are not the only kind of history we need. A southern history devoted entirely to open and ironic narratives would be no more satisfying than one tolerant only of thesis-driven, problem-addressing analyses. Fixed narratives have served us well for generations, creating powerful and stirring books; experiments with other kinds of history writing must build on and honor that literature. But, all that said, there may still be a role for histories that try to make us a bit less certain about the South we think we know so well, a place for other kinds of southern stories.

⁹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defence* (New York, 1944); and C. Vann Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History* (Baton Rouge, 1960).