

Public Abstract

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Title:THE SPACE OF THE SOUTH AND SELF-DEFINITION IN AFRICAN AMERICAN RETURN
MIGRATION NOVELS OF THE POST-CIVIL RIGHTS ERA

My dissertation examines the representation of the return migration in African American novels across the last five decades and argues that these return migration novels are distinct from earlier migration narratives and, as such, do not fit within the available critical frameworks developed from Great Migration literature. Historically, the return migration occurred throughout the south-to-north Great Migration, but the literature does not present the possibility of a successful return to the South until the mid-1970s, which is where my project begins. My critical approach brings together W.E.B. Du Bois's theory of double consciousness and theories of place in order to understand the importance of the region of the South in contemporary African American literature. The American South remains a fluid and ambiguous space both geographically and metaphorically. I attempt to balance the significance of place in the novels with the relationships between the community and the individual. Although literary scholars have noted a shift in the treatment of the South in African American literature beginning in the mid-1970s, they have not thoroughly accounted for that shift beyond their general interest in the representation of the South as a space of healing enabled by the presence of the ancestor. I argue that the significance of the South in African American return migration novels of the post-Civil Rights era goes beyond its function as the site of the ancestor. The South, in a state of redefinition following the Civil Rights Movement, provides a fluid space where values of community and individualism relative to identity can be reconciled through the return migrant's connection to that space.