

Southern Comforts: Rooted in a Florida Place. By Sudyé Cauthen. (Santa Fe, NM: The Center for American Places, 2007. Preface, illustrations, maps, notes, glossary, index. Pp. xvii, 194. \$29.95 cloth.)
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Memoirs of place often tend to trade on a sense of nostalgia, loss, change, and regret. The place is always one diminished in some way, in comparison with its past. The tone of Sudyé Cauthen's *Southern Comforts* is refreshingly more complex than that. As one might expect in a good memoir, the author comes to understand her place, including its contradictions and hidden aspects, as the book develops. The loss of place she inevitably documents is ultimately the occasion for freedom rather than regret, as she finds ways to incorporate what was, both the good and bad, with what is, both the good and bad. And her Uncle Orion's answer to her question "is this all there is?" could serve as epigraph to the quest at the core of the book: "Oh, Hon-eee, you in this with the rest of us." (156)

Cauthen's memoir is about Alachua, both the county and the town. The book is organized into two major parts, one focusing on the countryside and the other on the town, and a third briefer part that revisits the changed place today. The two major parts can be seen as relating in several ways – a move from the wider rural area to the narrower "urban" area; a move in time, from an account of the layers of meaning of the land to a more conscious perspective brought by the distance of the author in later years; and, a move from the construction of a set of primary documents of the author's past, having the feel of immediacy, to a more aware account of the social factors that made the place what it is. Race, for instance, plays only an implicit role in the first part, but is explicit (indeed, central) in the second. In the first part, Letha DeCoursey tells stories of raising kids and making do as the granddaughter of emancipated slaves; in the second part, the stories Letha's sister Rebecca and others tell about injustice and marginalization serve to highlight the racial divide that lingers and is inscribed on the town's geography.

So, what kind of a place is Cauthen's Alachua? It is a place of back roads, and the people who choose to live on them. Culture bends to nature, rather than dominating it. She compresses a long history in well

written scenes that draw connections over time (I kept thinking of John Hanson Mitchell's *Ceremonial Time*, which charts one square mile, "Scratch Flat", over 15,000 years of history). Cauthen both sketches the activities of ordinary people and also shows how those activities change over time and evolve into new ways. But, for Cauthen, what ties all this together is the question of why she keeps being drawn back to a place which, consciously, she has tried to leave for decades.

Cauthen's self-questioning moves *Southern Comforts* out of straight memoir and toward something else. The dust jacket pegs that "something else" as social analysis, and one reviewer quoted on the back calls it "history and wisdom". As the alternate focus to memoir, neither of these feels quite right. The sensibility shares more with nature writing than it does with anything as systematic as social analysis; Cauthen allows the familiarity of her home ground to become unfamiliar, both through her physical distance from the place throughout her life and the reflective distance evidenced as we move through the book, and she also allows the unfamiliarity of that little old place to become familiar, through narratives which create compelling characters and, more important, which create a place that is not so much lost in the past as it is woven into her life.

One strength of this book is that the picture of Alachua becomes a layered and complex one. While there may have been good old days, we get a sense of struggle and pain right from the beginning. While there is loss over time ("Being back in Alachua is like that, like watching a loved relative die, bit by bit" – 9), there is also realization. The loss of place, like the loss of the many relatives Cauthen chronicles, is never just personal tragedy, but is always the occasion for recognizing another layer of meaning that those who live in a place intuitively feel. The kind of people introduced in the first half as just characters in a reminiscence raise questions in the second half about what it means to be from a place and who gets to define what that place means. While there are elements of oral history and personal memory in this book, it should be taken first as creative non-fiction, in the sense that the craft of writing and the attention to structure are what makes the points here, rather than any deliberate sense of argument.

And so, what does this work contribute to the historical project, and has Cauthen succeeded in making us care about this place? Clearly, the more one is familiar with Alachua, the more resonant the writing will be. But *Southern Comforts* simultaneously evokes a complex Florida that is neither just a place of regret nor of desire. By the final part of the book, there is certainly regret, as the Alachua of back roads has given way to restaurants and stores. Cauthen's home, both literally and figuratively, has become a memory – her house was moved and became “Angel Gardens Café” and Alachua town itself is unrecognizable. But there is also hope – she has to chasten herself for thinking negatively, and is glad that “the 1980s face of Alachua with its boarded-up buildings and small thinking appears to have been replaced by so handsome and striking a visage.” (151-2)

Cauthen's Alachua might have been reduced to an elegy, and that would have been the easy story. Instead, she gives us a good example of how creative work can provide a historically rich view of a place.

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