

5-1-2023

Book Review: The Tacky South

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Recommended Citation

Glover, S. (2023). Book Review: The Tacky South. *Georgia Library Quarterly*, 60(2). Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/glq/vol60/iss2/16>

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The Tacky South edited by Katharine A. Burnett and Monica Carol Miller (Louisiana State University Press, 2022: ISBN 9780807177891, \$35.00)

The Tacky South sets the stage for the reader with the cover, a smiling, neon, 1980s-inspired Dolly Parton portrait accentuated by a rhinestone, cowboy-esque font. The collection is divided into three sections: "Policing Tackiness," "Revolutionary Tackiness," and "Dolly as Common Ground." These sections build on themselves, beginning by asking: what is tacky? And why is tackiness particularly Southern? In "Revolutionary Tacky," the essays grapple with the extrapolation of tacky to other, specifically non-Southern, regions. And finally, in "Dolly as Common Ground," essays explore tacky as a method of subverting traditional, middle-class values.

The term "tacky" is synonymous with poor White trash. In "Picturing the Tacky," Jolene Hubbs notes the term became popular in Gilded Age periodicals, offering middle- and upper-class readers a foil with which to establish themselves. In "Tacky Mountain Cousins," Elizabeth Aiken expands this comparison by noting that by seeing the South—specifically Appalachia—as the realm of the poor, uneducated hillbilly, the upper and middle class (and the post-Civil War nation) could quantify forward progress. Similarly, within the Southern region, tacky is used as a marker of acceptability, especially regarding White Southern women. Tacky is used as a warning that one's behavior is on the verge of trash. While tacky can be forgiven or overcome, trash cannot. This line of thought is used as a mode of control for the "proper behavior" White Southern women must ascribe to. At times, tacky is also used as a unifier between class lines. In "Rednecks on Reality TV,"



Image courtesy of the publisher

Aaron Duplantier uses the *Duck Dynasty* family as an example. The family was wealthy well before the popular show but used the rustic, wealthy-but-came-from-poverty aesthetic to connect with viewers of lower socioeconomic status. Other shows, such as *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, come off as exploitative, with a low-income family leaning into the trashy stereotype for monetary gain.

This leads into “Revolutionary Tacky,” where tackiness is discussed as an aesthetic trope that the audience willingly participates in. In “Perfect Reflections of Human Imperfections,” Travis A. Rountree explores the career of country music singer Robert Earl Keen. Keen began his career as a typical country singer. After gaining a steady fan base, he leaned into tacky to poke at the heteromale norms of the genre. His most famous display of tacky includes Hank Williams Jr. dressed in drag. Music is often connected to tacky when used as a device for progress. The B-52's are often associated with tacky, a label that the band often pushed against, saying that they were not trying to be a novelty or make a statement—they were merely enjoying the things they loved.

The discussion of tacky as a subversive technique for progress continues in “Dolly as Common

Ground.” The queen of Appalachia is noted for her use of tacky as a method of both proudly displaying her roots and promoting progress through acceptance. She proudly displays her feminine figure and openly welcomes her LGBTQ+ fan base. Dolly is a paragon of transformation, pairing rural with glamorous and power with femininity.

All in all, *The Tacky South* is a portrait of the strengths and limitations of the notion of tacky in Southern culture. This book is recommended for academic libraries, public libraries, and those interested in Appalachian culture.

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