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Editor's Introduction 55.1

Philip C. Kolin

University of Southern Mississippi, philip.kolin@usm.edu

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Editor's Introduction

PHILIP C. KOLIN

This general issue offers readers five essays (six counting a review essay), a trio of interviews, a photo essay, and a gathering of poems. What these diverse contributions have in common is that each explores the importance of the visual—in photography, cinema, music, jazz, poetry, fiction—as it sheds light on Southern authors, landscapes, and texts.

Marcus Tribbett's lead essay examines agency and identity in *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, an antebellum slave narrative that recounts the story of William and Ellen Craft who escaped from Georgia in 1848 with the light-skinned Ellen, "ambiguously gendered and racialized," dressed as a man named "William Johnson" who claimed to be her husband's owner. Though narrated from a first person male perspective, the pair in all likelihood wrote the narrative themselves with help from William Wells Brown. Tribbett's essay argues that this unique text represents "collaboration within a communally resistant tradition of literature and politics" where the cross-dressed and white-passing Ellen challenged elitist, patriarchal, white supremacist ideologies of gender and race. Tribbett insightfully concludes that this narrative is "as relevant for readers who would resist oppressive racial force in the twenty-first century as it was for the original readers of *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*."

In her study of Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* (1942), Julia Simon holds that the novel sets into motion "competing economies of exchange and transfer . . . to tease out multiple ways of understanding both forms of accounting and forms of settling accounts." These forms of accounting and settling, she argues, are accompanied by concepts of fairness, equity, or justice that the novel tackles in various guises—familial and spiritual. Viewing the commissary ledgers as key symbols in the novel, Simon sees in the space between repudiation and redemption a charged spectrum of contrac-

tual obligations that highlight the struggle over equity and justice in Southern history. According to Simon, interwoven narratives parallel the novel's cryptic ledgers and emphasize the social justice that Faulkner advocated.

Derek Wood's following essay focuses on *Les Cenelles* Society of Arts and Letters, a 1940s circle that takes its name from an 1845 collection of African American poetry. Even though they were not a well-known group, the members of *Les Cenelles* accomplished notable success with their 1942 art exhibit in New Orleans. Led by Marcus Christian, these African American artists navigated around the restrictions of a Jim Crow South to create and to present their art. Following the lead of their nineteenth-century predecessors, *Les Cenelles* produced art often inspired by French Romanticism while advocating the moral necessity of equal rights for African Americans. Many of its members worked on the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) led by Lyle Saxon, who, by the way, befriended Tennessee Williams. In addition to their work on the FWP, these writers published widely, both articles and editorials, in African American newspapers, most notably the *Louisiana Weekly*, exemplifying yet again the political and artistic contributions of African Americans throughout Louisiana's history to fight for equal rights for "free people of color."

Filmmaker and historian Sascha Alexandra Just explores the contributions of another African American group collectively known as the Black Indian Tribes of New Orleans who, during Mardi Gras, parade down the streets of the city's black neighborhoods in feathered and beaded costumes paying tribute to Native Americans who helped their enslaved African ancestors escape and with them form so-called "maroon societies" in the Louisiana swamps. As a result of her field research and filmmaking, Just claims that these performances (1) remind us of the Black Indians' past struggles against white oppression, (2) express Black Indians' continuous opposition to today's racialized society, and (3) strengthen their communities' sense of self. Filming the performance history of this marginalized group, Just sees their struggle as emblematic of the larger nationwide opposition to white oppression. Throughout her essay, Just thus visually contextualizes the radical quality of Black Indian masking practices in contrast to those of New Orleans's dominant carnival festivities, and reminds us about the city's recent efforts to control representations of Black Indians in the media.

Exploring Pare Lorentz's iconic 1938 documentary film *The River*, Stephen Knepper focuses on the lower Mississippi featured in the film and the role the river played in shaping the South's ecology, landscapes, economy, and people. Attentive to Lorentz's majestic cinematography and haunting poetry, Knepper maintains that the South occupied a critical place in Lorentz's film. In fact, he points out that the film stressed that the economic

health of the nation ultimately depended on the ecological health of the Mississippi watershed. But flooding and rural poverty along the lower Mississippi were not just regional problems; in Lorentz's classic they become warning signs for the nation at large. As Knepper emphasizes, Lorentz's "portrait [of the South] is not of a perverse and backward region mired in its own self-inflicted problems, but [that] of a region bearing the brunt of a national disaster," and concludes that "the film argues that [while] the nation as a whole benefited economically from the South's soil mining, the flooding that devastated the region was exacerbated by deforestation further up the Mississippi River."

In the first interview in this issue, Joan Brady talks with nationally famous choreographer, ballroom dancer, and teacher Kelly Vuyovich. A D'Iberville, Mississippi, native and one of nine children, Vuyovich began his career in south Mississippi and New Orleans before moving to New York, and then to Las Vegas and New Jersey, where he distinguished himself as a ballroom dance authority long before the success of such popular television shows as *Dancing with the Stars* or *So You Think You Can Dance*. Vuyovich reminisces about his Mississippi roots, his early dance experiences, his accomplishments as a teacher at both Fred Astaire and Arthur Murray studios, his establishing various studios, his performances in shows in the Big Apple and Las Vegas, and his associations with numerous illustrious actors and singers. He also candidly discusses his sexuality and the serious health issues that did not deter him from his dreams. Returning home in 2001, he "put Mississippi on the ballroom dance map" by teaching rigorous classes in smooth and Latin dances and by opening several studios, including the award-winning *Illuminations* in Hattiesburg, which boasted classes of fifty or more students taught by a staff of instructors, some of whom Vuyovich trained himself. The interview then concludes with Vuyovich relating his experiences in ballroom dancing to cotillions and other festive occasions that forged Southern identity.

Tom Rankin next interviews folklorist and photographer William Ferris, former director of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), to trace the evolution of his career, the artistic and cultural influences that shaped his photography, and the convergence of content and artistic approaches that emerge in his image work. Ferris eloquently recounts growing up on a farm outside Vicksburg and how his family influenced his early vision of the power of documentary photography, and the ways he was represented and reached a large and diverse audience. Rankin's interview also surveys Ferris's sustaining interest in Southern writers, many of whom he photographed over the years, as well as his keen insight into folkways. In Ferris's words, "As a folklorist, I try to gather it all, I think of this French

phrase, ‘la comédie humaine,’ the human comedy that is associated with Balzac.” As the French novelist did for his country, Ferris uncovers the *elan vital* of Southern life.

In the third and final interview in this issue, Corey Taylor records his December 2015 conversation with Sterling Plumpp who created an inimitable body of poetry steeped in African American vernacular culture, especially through blues and jazz, creating a poetic language that embodies the cultural complexity and artistic significance of the African American experience. While Taylor acknowledges that in previous interviews Plumpp discussed the biographical, musical, literary, and cultural forces that shaped his writings, in this new interview the poet revisits several of these perennial influences—bebop and the blues, Western and African American literary traditions, his family history—that may have been less frequently covered. For instance, as Taylor notes, Plumpp elaborates on the formal development of his poetry and its educational value, provides updates on his long-awaited epic poem “Mfua’s Song,” and, most compellingly, delves into his experiences as a native Mississippian—from his youth to adulthood—speaking powerfully about race, class, and culture.

In her photo essay, Hilda Martin Wade documents the early history of one of Biloxi’s, and the South’s, most well-known beverages—Barq’s Root Beer—sharing with readers a seventy-year archive of less frequently seen family photos, bottles, advertising signage, and gifts. In essence, Wade’s photo essay chronicles the material culture promoting a Southern soft drink that ultimately went national when Barq’s was acquired by Coca Cola in 1995. Wade’s extensive collection of Barq’s memorabilia reflects her personal connection to the company (her grandfather, her father, and her brother all worked for Barq’s) and Southern hamlets and cities where it flourished. Immediately following Wade’s photo essay, another valuable contribution to the history of this iconic beverage is Erica Van Schaik’s bibliography of commentary on the company and the family that founded it.

The issue ends with a round of poetry led by Ovid Vickers’s lyrical tribute to Mississippi composed to be read at the inauguration of Mississippi’s sixty-second governor, Ronnie Musgrove. Like other contributions to this issue, Vickers’s civic tribute helps us to see and understand the South.