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## 57.4 Editor Introduction

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## Editors' Introduction

KATE COCHRAN

As *The Southern Quarterly* continues to catch up to its regular publication schedule, so too does the pandemic continue: just before the beginning of the fall 2021 semester, we are anxiously watching as universities around the country issue mask mandates and vaccination recommendations. Few people can still claim not to know anyone who has fallen ill with Covid-19, and the numbers of infected are skyrocketing with the advent of the delta variant, particularly across the US South. Many governors of Southern states seem to bolster the standpoint of the vaccine-hesitant (both Arkansas and Texas have mandated no-mask policies), though others, like John Bel Edwards of Louisiana, are proactively re-instituting statewide mask mandates. In states with such low vaccination rates as those in the South, the lack of state-sanctioned safeguards will have only one outcome. While we cannot anticipate the future with any certainty, it does seem likely that the South may suffer disproportionately from the spread of the virus.

Historically, the South has often borne the brunt of (inter)national crises, whether economic—like the Great Depression, two World Wars, and the inflation and unemployment of the 1970s energy crisis—or social, as with the resurgence of the KKK, ongoing racial violence, and the Civil Rights Movement. Many Southern states are particularly vulnerable to such crises due to increased poverty, geographic remoteness, and lack of infrastructure. These disadvantages also apply to plenty of rural areas across the US, regardless of region. However, according to an article in the *Nashville Tennessean*, “Across states in the South, the least vaccinated communities are generally in more rural, conservative counties, where a combination of more limited access and far-right politics dissuaded many from getting a shot. But even in southern cities, where vaccines have been easy to obtain for months, few communities are even half vaccinated.” Both the rural and the urban South, then, are at a greater risk.

Plenty of pundits are proclaiming various theories about vaccine hesitancy, from distrust of government overreach fueled by conservative propagandists to memories of the unconscionable Tuskegee experiments. For me, the common thread seems to lie in a resistance to change. While that resistance should not be attributed as a characteristic of Southern exceptionalism, which all of us Southern scholars have been decrying for decades, it does feel awfully familiar. As does the increasing aggression among Southerners divided about Covid safeguards, especially vaccination. Alabama Governor Kay Ivey recently stated, “It’s time to start blaming the unvaccinated folks, not the regular folks. It’s the unvaccinated folks that are letting us down” (as qtd in Tamburin et al). Her distinction between “vaccinated/regular” and “unvaccinated[irregular]” hopefully portends a normalization of receiving Covid vaccinations, though it also exacerbates divisiveness in the region.

However, we soldier on.

This general issue of *The Southern Quarterly* brings you a delightful variety of scholarly essays, poems, and book reviews: three of each, achieving a magical balance of divine harmony. Our essays represent some of the traditional interests of Southern studies—the Southern Gothic, folklore, racial inequality—but updated with unique approaches. For Alison Graham-Bertolini, Karen Russell’s 2011 novel *Swamplandia!* offers fertile ground for a reexamination of the terrifying boundary between life and death. Observing that the setting of the Florida swamp reflects the liminality of “terra viscous,” Graham-Bertolini takes the analogy further, connecting the literal shaky ground with the characters’ uncertain grounding in reality. Graham-Bertolini invokes Freud and Lacan to account for the horror of a psychic liminality as experienced by the novel’s Bigtree children and furthers our understanding of the way the Southern Gothic operates.

Shelley Ingram similarly examines the workings of folklore in James Hannaham’s harrowing novel *Delicious Foods*, from 2015. Observing how Obeah, blues music, bird motifs, and ritual recur in the narrative, Ingram argues that folklore works to “crystallize the recursive nature of time and trauma by inserting into the text elements that bring a shared past forward into the present and that press at the limits of place and knowledge.” Through folklore, disempowered characters achieve the agency to challenge the systemic racial oppression of a modern-day slave plantation.

In “Systemic Racism, Queer White Privilege, and the Carnavalesque Humor of John Kennedy Toole’s *A Confederacy of Dunces*,” Tison Pugh shows how Toole’s protagonist is allied with the queer character Dorian Greene and Black character Burma Jones to underscore the upside-down boundary crossings of the carnivalesque. While racist homophobe Ignatius

Reilly is inspired to launch two crusades, one for “Moorish dignity” and the other to install queer men in the halls of power, Pugh notes how Black and queer characters inhabit different worlds in the same city but argues that the novel ends with the promise of a rising Black middle class.

Our poets hail from Mississippi and both Carolinas, and their powerful verse is at once evocative of Southern locales and poignantly universal. Claude Wilkinson’s “Before Being Deployed to the Middle East, a Group of Soldiers Eat Together at a Steakhouse in Grenada, Mississippi” aligns a group of soldiers’ steakhouse dinner with the Last Supper, while Joel Ferdon’s “South, Southeast” manifests a seasonal reverie. Finally, “Japanese Maples at Thanksgiving” reflects Gilbert Allen’s take on how the tree’s unique beauty connects with the heartbreaking innocence of youth.

Finally, we offer three excellent book reviews. Editorial Advisory Board member Martyn Bone reviews the essay collection *The Bohemian South: Creating Countercultures, from Poe to Punk* (U of North Carolina P, 2017), edited by Shawn Chandler Bingham and Lindsey A. Freeman. *The Saddest Words: William Faulkner’s Civil War* by Michael Gorra (Liveright, 2020) is reviewed by Matthew C. Hawk, and John Zheng reviews the Grammy-winning *Voices of Mississippi*, by William Ferris, another esteemed member of our Editorial Advisory Board.

We hope these pieces will entertain, enlighten, and enliven any time you may have to spend away from your usual people and places during this difficult period.

#### WORKS CITED

- Tamburin, Adam, Brett Kelman, Corinne S. Kennedy, and Sarah Haselhorst. “‘I Fear I Will Bury a Child’: Southern States Vulnerable to Covid-19 Delta Variant Surge.” *Nashville Tennessean*, 24 July 2021, [www.tennessean.com/story/news/local/coronavirus/2021/07/25/southern-states-particularly-vulnerable-delta-variant-covid-19-surge/8041723002/](http://www.tennessean.com/story/news/local/coronavirus/2021/07/25/southern-states-particularly-vulnerable-delta-variant-covid-19-surge/8041723002/).