

Special Issue  
Between Two Worlds: Free People of Color  
in Southern Cultural History

Editor's Introduction . . . Douglas B. Chambers 5

PROCEEDINGS OF THE 2005  
NATCHEZ LITERARY AND CINEMA CELEBRATION

Southern Free People of Color in the  
Age of William Johnson . . . Ira Berlin 9

William Johnson's Diary:  
The Text and the Man Behind It . . . William L. Andrews 18

Free Blacks in the Urban South: 1800-1850 . . . Leonard P. Curry 35

Black Masters: The Misunderstood  
Slaveowners . . . Larry Koger 52

Regional Identity, Black Barbers,  
and the African American Tradition  
of Entrepreneurialism . . . Douglas W. Bristol, Jr. 74

Searching for Free People of Color  
in Colonial Natchez . . . G. Douglas Inglis 97

A History of the William T. Johnson  
and Family Memorial Papers . . . Lester Sullivan 113

**On the cover:** Kathryn Doherty, *Colorful Abstract I*, 2003, Pastel, 24  
x 18. Published by Modern Art Editions and available as a poster at  
<[www.theartpublishinggroup.com](http://www.theartpublishinggroup.com)>

*Prince Among Slaves: A  
Documentary Film Project* . . . Alex Kronemer, Louis Barbash,  
and Michael Wolfe 137

*Isle of Canes* and Issues of Conscience:  
Master-Slave Sexual Dynamics and  
Slaveholding by Free People of Color . . . Elizabeth Shown Mills 158

Robert Penn Warren's  
*Band of Angels* at Fifty . . . William Bedford Clark 176

### BOOK REVIEWS

Brown, Gordon S. *Toussaint's Clause:  
The Founding Fathers and  
the Haitian Revolution.* . . . Mathew Mason 187

Minchin, Timothy J. *Fighting Against  
the Odds: A History of Southern Labor  
Since World War II.* . . . David M. Anderson 191

Boles, John B., ed. *Shapers of Southern  
History: Autobiographical  
Reflections.* . . . William K. Scarborough 195

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## Editor's Introduction

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by

Douglas B. Chambers

In this issue we inaugurate the annual publication of selected papers from the proceedings of the Natchez Literary and Cinema Celebration. Founded in 1990 by Carolyn Vance Smith of Copiah-Lincoln Community College, the Celebration held in Natchez, Mississippi each year has grown to be a major cultural event in the Deep South. Attended each February by several hundreds of book lovers and others interested in things literary and historical, the Celebration attracts to each year's theme top scholars and renowned writers, as well as accomplished younger colleagues, film-makers and other cultural innovators. We are honored to present a selection of the Celebration's papers and addresses, and we trust that you will find them interesting and thought-provoking.

The 2005 Celebration was organized around the theme of free African Americans in the antebellum South. Coordinated with the opening of the William Johnson House, a National Park Service historic site and museum documenting the life of the most famous free black person in antebellum Natchez, the 2005 Celebration explored the many dimensions of life for black people who were free in the era of slavery. Some of the participants such as Ira Berlin, Leonard P. Curry and Larry Koger helped define the modern historical study of free blacks, and they draw on a lifetime of research in their respective papers. William L. Andrews and William Bedford Clark are eminent scholars of the literary side, focusing on the published narratives of ex-slaves in the nineteenth century and on the novels of Robert Penn Warren in the twentieth, respectively. Both of their contributions are in the voice of their public addresses to the Celebration, and in their lively writing they evoke the feeling of hearing an essay as spoken word. Douglas W. Bristol does a double turn. Not only does he contribute a stimulating essay on how regional differences in the experiences of black barbers (mostly free though some enslaved) can inform our larger understanding of African American entrepreneurialism, but he also supervised the three book reviews, each a little gem of its own. G. Douglas Inglis illuminates the historical colonial background to the local world that later produced William Johnson (ca. 1809-1851), and Lester Sullivan, while drawing on his own expertise as archivist (and

persevering in the face of dislocation following Hurricane Katrina and the extensive damage suffered by his institution, Xavier University in New Orleans) gives us a fresh view of Johnson in antebellum Natchez.

In keeping with the ‘cinema’ aspect of the Celebration, we also include a fascinating discussion of a planned documentary film (for PBS television) on the life of Abdul Rahman Ibrahima Sori (1762-1829), the storied enslaved “Prince” of the Natchez District. The executive producer Alex Kronemer and his two associates Louis Barbash and Michael Wolfe guide us through the extraordinary life of this Muslim Fulbe (Fulani) African from his enslavement in Islamic Futa Jallon (present-day Guinea) in West Africa through his decades of slavery in Mississippi and his eventual freedom and return to Africa. Sometimes truth *is* stranger than fiction, and while Ibrahima’s story seems almost too dramatic to be true, it is not just the stuff of fiction, but of historical reality.

And yet, sometimes history is best apprehended through *fiction*. The writer Elizabeth Shown Mills, author of *Isle of Canes* (2004), uses her novel about the Afro-French Creoles of Louisiana to ask, given that the past is ‘another country’, how we just might travel ‘there’ and what we might see. The many contradictions and complications of real people in the past, often largely forgotten – the choices that they made or were forced to make in their difficult circumstances – still bedevil historians. In considering free black people, the fact that some owned slaves and that some slave women negotiated their way to freedom through sexual relationships with their masters (producing children who generally were not recognized by their white fathers, at least not officially) requires us to imagine the manifold realities of people who were just as complicated, contradictory and perhaps muddled as were their times.

We thank the contributors for graciously allowing us to bring into print what originally were papers and addresses meant for a public conference. And special thanks are due to Dr. Aubrey Lucas, president emeritus of The University of Southern Mississippi, who first suggested that a partnership between *The Southern Quarterly* and the Natchez Literary and Cinema Celebration would be fruitful. I hope you, our readers, agree. We also congratulate the official sponsors of the Celebration (Copiah-Lincoln Community College, Natchez National Historical Park, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, and Mississippi Public Broadcasting) for their continuing support.

Upon reading this selection of papers dedicated to understanding the difficult and yet deeply human experience of free people of color

living within a larger reality of racial chattel slavery, I am reminded of Maya Angelou's iconic poem on the bittersweet intersection of African American history and hope, "Still I Rise" (1978), rendered here in part:

Still I Rise

You may write me down in history  
With your bitter, twisted lies,  
You may trod me in the very dirt  
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Just like moons and like suns,  
With the certainty of tides,  
Just like hopes springing high,  
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?  
Bowed head and lowered eyes?  
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,  
Weakened by my soulful cries.

You may shoot me with your words,  
You may cut me with your eyes,  
You may kill me with your hatefulness,  
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Out of the huts of history's shame  
I rise  
Up from a past that's rooted in pain  
I rise  
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,  
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear  
I rise  
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear  
I rise  
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave  
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.  
I rise  
I rise  
I rise.