
Editor's Introduction

Douglas B. Chambers

It is a kaleidoscopic South that we offer here, one constantly turning, where, in this historic political season, to quote the quintessential southern political novel, Jack Burden's nightmarish Depression-era dream "that all life is but the dark heave of blood and the twitch of the nerve," may well turn out to be "in a special way, rather bracing and tonic" for our own time too.¹ It is this intersection of change and continuity, of the purposeful and the serendipitous, and in the end, of the future and the past, drawn out as they are from the oft-contradictory drama of everyday lives, that the works in this issue seek to bring light and understanding.

As an interdisciplinary journal, this issue contains a variety of scholarly work. There are insightful literary analyses (Russell, Abbott, Piacentino), which range in subject from Kate Chopin's post-Civil War novel *At Fault* (1890), set in plantation Louisiana, to Willa Cather's plantation novel (1940), to Alice Walker's sunbelt South short story "Kindred Spirits" (1985), set in modern Miami. Each of these essays challenges the reader to see these well-known works, and the worlds they evoke, in new ways precisely because they are using these texts to ask large, provocative questions. Did the "harmonious vision" of the post-Reconstruction South rest on writing blacks out of the cultural landscape? In trying to tell a nineteenth-century story to a mid twentieth-century southern audience, could only whites be rendered heroic? And after all the upheaval of the civil rights generation, might one not find personal healing in reconciling with the ghosts of all these 'kindred spirits'?

Derek Alderman, a cultural geographer, gives us a fascinating account of how Elvis fans mobilized in the 1990s to save the Memphis housing project where The King had lived as a teenager, and in the process he suggests something important and unexpected about these fans a full generation after Presley's death. As well, an analysis of two movie versions of the 1957 integration crisis in Little Rock, produced for TV in 1981 and 1993, respectively, say more about current generations than they do about the historical events themselves. We also include two self-consciously sentimental, though anti-nostalgic, "memoirs": one a personal narrative of visiting Robert Penn Warren's birthplace, and the other an oral-historical account of the lost world of mid twentieth-century piney woods turpentine camps.

We are also proud to continue a *Southern Quarterly* tradition that now dates back two decades, with the twentieth annual installment of Judith H. Bonner's comprehensive bibliography on the visual arts and architecture in the South. We are grateful to the Historic New Orleans Collection (and its Williams Research Center) for this continuing scholarly collaboration.²

In this issue I also wish to mark the third anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, with a focus on southern Mississippi.³ Therefore we include a portfolio of a series of portraits by the emerging artist Paul McCall.⁴ These charcoal-on-paper portraits of individual "survivors," all residents of Hattiesburg, and the artist's accompanying text, remind us of our common humanity and of the power of our personal stories. We are showcasing this remarkable contemporary artist by using McCall's work for the covers of the four issues of this volume. And we include a review of a photography exhibition, which ran from 29 August to 11 September 2008 at the reconstructed Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art in Biloxi, MS; for other powerful images by the young photographer Lauren Byrd, see our special issue on Katrina ("Voices of the Storm," vol.43 no.3, Spring 2006). We thank both artists, and especially Paul and his wife Dominique McCall, for their support of *The Southern Quarterly*.

This issue, then, presents the South as a coat of many colors. It is an ever-changing crazy quilt of hope and fear, of action and reaction, cobbled together by an over-powering sense of living within a fractured regional history, within a particular haunting dream (and not necessarily Dr. King's most optimistic one), and a stunning hopefulness that we probably do not deserve. In closing here is an excerpt from Robert Penn Warren's iconic poem, "Bearded Oaks" (1944):

... The storm of noon above us rolled,
Of light the fury, furious gold,
The long drag troubling us, the depth:
Dark is unrocking, unrippling, still.

Passion and slaughter, ruth, decay
Descend, minutely whispering down,
Silted down swaying streams, to lay
Foundation for our voicelessness.

All our debate is voiceless here,
As all our rage, the rage of stone;

If hope is hopeless, then fearless is fear,
And history is thus undone. ...⁵

NOTES

¹Quotations are from Robert Penn Warren, *All The King's Men* (1946; repr. New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1996), p.467.

²For information on this remarkable civic and research institution, located in the heart of the French Quarter in New Orleans, see their website at <http://www.hnoc.org/>.

³The final editing work on the issue was done as the Gulf South region was hit by two hurricanes in the span of a fortnight this September, that is, *Gustav*, a near-Category 3 that hit on 1 September and caused major damage in Baton Rouge, the inland capital of Louisiana; and *Ike*, a strong Category 2 that landed on 13 September and devastated Galveston and the Texas gulf coast and caused significant damage in Houston, as well as flooding as far east as Bay St. Louis, MS. Our hearts go out to all our friends and colleagues throughout the region; you are not forgotten.

⁴Trained at the Pratt Institute of Art in Seattle, WA, in 2007 McCall had his first solo museum exhibition, "Unspoken Realities" (from which the current cover piece comes), at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute (AL). See his website at www.paulmccall.net.

⁵Robert Penn Warren, *The Collected Poems of Robert Penn Warren*, ed. by John Burt (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), p.65.