

# Arkansas Review: A Journal of Delta Studies

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## A New Direction for the Arkansas Review

Beginning with this issue, the *Arkansas Review* (formerly *Kansas Quarterly*) becomes an interdisciplinary regional studies journal. Our focus will be the seven-state Mississippi River Delta, the swath of land on both sides of the river extending from Saint Louis southward to the Gulf of Mexico. Its rich alluvial topsoil has given this region immense potential for agricultural production. The fields of cotton, soybeans, and rice that checkerboard the Delta testify to that potential. Yet, ironically this has also been a region of considerable economic deprivation. Delta counties in Arkansas and Mississippi consistently rank among the lowest in per capita income in the nation.

But economic poverty has not led to cultural poverty. The Delta has been the source of some of the most vital and influential art to emerge from the United States during the twentieth century. William Faulkner, for example, won the Nobel Prize. Richard Wright and Eudora Welty should have. But one doesn't have to look to written literature and other instances of "high" art to note the cultural contributions of the Delta. Consider popular music: there is no sound or style today that doesn't owe at least something to the blues, which emerged from the Delta experience of African Americans about a century ago. Carried northward by the black diaspora of the early twentieth century, disseminated throughout the nation via phonograph records and other forms of mass-mediated culture, now institutionalized in university courses and commercialized in chains of night clubs, the blues may be the most important single export from the Delta.

And so we begin pointing the *Arkansas Review* in a new direction by examining this export. The essays, photographs, and poems which comprise this issue explore the blues from a variety of perspectives. Jeff Todd Titon and Kip Lornell explore some of the features of what's come to be called the "Second Blues Revival." (The first occurred during the 1960s when the vintage blues performers who had recorded in the twenties and thirties were being "rediscovered" by folksong revivalists.) Titon shows how the tourist model that could always be applied metaphorically to white, middle-class interest in black, lower-class, Delta-

based song has become a literal phenomenon as a "new blues tourism." Lornell suggests that our current blues revival parallels what happened when middle-class whites in the forties and fifties revived the traditional jazz known as "Dixieland." Both these essayists delivered versions of their papers as featured lectures at the series of Delta Studies Symposia (Titon in 1996 and Lornell in 1997) that Arkansas State University has been sponsoring for the past four years. These speakers' visits to Arkansas were made possible in part by grant funds from the Arkansas Humanities Council and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Another Symposium lecturer (from 1996) who has made his work available to us now in print is Barry Lee Pearson. An avid interviewer of blues performers, he has sampled the story repertoires and range of narrative genres that bluesmen from the Delta often perform. Marcus Charles Tribbett approaches the blues from a different angle, that of semiotics and culture criticism. He shows how Lizzie Douglas (better known as "Memphis Minnie") used her blues lyrics and her performance persona to negotiate her gendered identity. The final essay in our collection of blues studies comes from another veteran of the Delta Studies Symposia (from 1997). Patricia R. Schroeder demonstrates how blues serves as a paradigm of African American expressive culture and may afford a means of access to that culture for those outside it.

We are also pleased to feature some fine examples of the creative work that the second blues revival is inspiring. Poetry by A. Van Jordan and James R. Lee follows a trail blazed by Langston Hughes, perhaps the first writer to recognize the poetic potential of the blues form and the blues ethos. Gay Reynolds' photographs lend a visual dimension to our understanding and celebration of the blues, a dimension that has long been the focus of the work of James Fraher, whose newly published collection of photographs of and interviews with blues musicians has found an authoritative reviewer in Peter R. Aschoff.

We begin with the blues, but the blues is only a beginning. The *Arkansas Review* intends to live up to its new subtitle: "A Journal of Delta Studies." Future

issues will explore other facets of Delta life: the rich literary heritage that includes not only Faulkner, Wright, and Welty, but dozens of other poets, fiction writers, dramatists, and essayists who have evoked the Delta in print; a history that stretches back to a Native American presence, whose remnants have made the Delta one of the most fecund archeological sites on the continent; social and political concerns that find root in that history and continue to shape life in the Delta; an ethnic heterogeneity that has generated both positive and negative responses—to name only a few. We will explore the Delta in well researched articles, reviews of relevant books and other Delta-oriented materials, and creative works in a variety of media that respond to or evoke the Delta experience.

While we are setting a new course for the publication with this issue, we cannot afford to ignore our own heritage. Some thirty years ago, Kansas State University began publishing the *Kansas Quarterly*, an interdisciplinary journal which published scholarship on a variety of subjects as well as important new creative work. In 1996 the magazine moved to Arkansas State University, where with a name change and under the editorship of Norman Lavers, it became an international journal of creative writing. In both its previous incarnations, the *Arkansas Review* has been recognized for the high quality of its content and of its appearance. While we will be doing some things differently, we hope that we can be part of an ongoing tradition of quality.

The list of editors on the inside cover of this issue stresses the obvious fact that putting together a magazine is a group activity. These editors' input has been crucial in the realization of this first Delta-oriented issue. Other people not part of that editorial group deserve some recognition for their contributions as well. To begin with, we are deeply indebted to Norman Lavers both for providing a model of excellence in academic publishing that we will use as our touchstone and for making the editorial transition as smooth as possible. Rick Lott and Shirleen Sando, members of his editorial staff, have also eased us into our new roles. This is also the space to thank others, including those who co-founded the Delta Studies Symposia, which have provided the catalyst for this issue of the *Arkansas Review*. The charge for developing a series of such conferences came from Charles R. Carr, Chair of ASU's Department of English and Philosophy. Those who comprised the founding committee were Rich-

ard Burns, Catherine Calloway, William Clements, Zita Ingham, Frances Malpezzi, and Ron Steffans. We received moral and economic support from Richard McGhee, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, Ruth Hawkins, Vice-President for Institutional Advancement, the late Mossie J. Richmond, Vice-President for Student Affairs, and the memory of Robert Hoskins, President of the University. This issue of the *Arkansas Review: A Journal of Delta Studies* would not have appeared without their efforts which began four years ago and, in some cases, continue. Finally, several people contributed directly to the production of this issue at some stage in the editorial process: Carol Johnson, Robin Joslin, Rick Lott, Frances Malpezzi, Curtis Steele, Winona Thiel, and Roger Wood. And the ASU Printshop under the direction of Rich Bundsgaard remains one of the most important factors in our being able to produce a high-quality publication.