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Special Issue on Contemporary Delta Poets and Poetry

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Guest Editor's Introduction

by Philip C. Kolin

About a year ago, when I started evaluating manuscripts for this special issue on representative Delta poets, I wrote to famed Arkansas author, Margaret Bolsterli, seeing if she might write a poem or two about the Delta. Her response was "Which Delta did you mean?" a question that the seven essays, twenty-nine poems, and interview included in this issue attempt to answer. At the heart of Bolsterli's question lies an ontology of place, poetics, and themes.

The Delta is no literary hegemony. In fact, geography alone cannot explain/contain Delta poetry any more than it could the blues which boasts a global adaptation, performance, and audience. Writing about Larry Thomas's poetry, J. Todd Hawkins rightfully cautions, "The reach of the Mississippi Delta extends far beyond the region's physical limits." Looking at the poets in this issue and in other forums devoted to Delta poetry, it may be more profitable, I believe, to talk about a Delta diaspora. One of the great Delta poets, Sterling Plumpp about whom *Arkansas Review* devoted a special issue in December 2005, wrote many of his poems while living and teaching in Chicago. Likewise, Thomas is most often regarded as a "Texas poet" but one who has "Delta in his blood." Peripatetic octogenarian Gordon Osing, who has lived and taught abroad for years, brings to his Delta poetry a global perspective informed by non-Western philosophies, literatures, and religions ranging from Aztec to African to East Asian. Frank Stanford's poetry, though set in the Delta, exhibits a Kafka-esque otherworldliness that roams far beyond the borders of the Mississippi Delta. But perhaps the most salient example of a poet who has infused another culture into his work is Jian Zheng. Born in Wuhan, a Chinese city of more than 10 million, and sent to the countryside to work with the

peasants during Mao's cultural revolution in the 1960s and 1970s, Zheng emigrated to rural Mississippi where for the last 25 years he has written about his "adopted homeland" and its people in the venerated Chinese poetic form of the haiku. Elizabeth Burk's essay on Zheng is brilliantly titled "Chinese Inkwash in the Delta."

In the lead essay, Ed Madden raises two further questions. "Is there a Delta poetry distinct from Southern poetry? How would we define it?" These questions get at the very heart of how we are to classify Delta poets and their work. Just as there is no clear-cut, iron-clad paradigms accounting for all Southern literature, there may be none to group all Delta poetry. If we need to expand Delta-ness, then we must also rethink Delta poetry as a subcategory of Southern letters which may further minimize it as regional literature. While we can talk about types of Southern literature, e.g., Plantation Fiction, the Rough South, Agrarians/Fugitives Poetry, the Gothic Southern novel, it may not be that convenient with Delta poetry which can incorporate many elements of Southern letters, some of them, or, in some cases, none of them. In this issue alone, we have Jo McDougall's Delta evoking what Billy Middleton perceives is the "power of nostalgia" through a "geography defined by ambivalence." Gordon Osing's poetry is, as Lea Graham points out, "no postcard-quaint place." While Greg Brownderville's Pumpkin Bend can be identified on a map of Arkansas, its mythos transcends and expands traditional views of a literary South. Frank Stanford's poetry vastly differs from Thomas's or Wilkinson's idea of the Delta. In fact, Wilkinson bristles at even labeling his work as "Delta poetry." Yet these diverse writers are grouped as Delta poets. In short, the designation resists easy classification as a type of South-

ern literature, something I believe Madden's questions were getting at.

Nonetheless, we can identify several iconic themes running through Delta poetry. While often including sorrel mules, catfish ponds, rice fields, cotton rows, clapboard churches, juke joints, the vast expanse of treeless land, levees, and the lurking Mississippi, Delta poetics confronts larger issues of history, or what Graham calls "the presence of the past," the mystery of belief, and a "soulful" reflection of life. So much Delta poetry responds to or traces the horrors of slavery, the traumas of such natural disasters as floods or drought, lost love affairs, dark secrets, the memory of things and times lost, reclaimed, or only imagined. Religion, and its arch enemy superstition, is another recurrent topic in much Delta poetry, e.g., Brownderville "marked" as a writer, his head injury a sign of his special calling or Stanford's horrors rising up from some infernal kingdom. And then there is

the blues, the original hymnody of the Delta, recording the legacy of Africans forced into bondage and a way to express their misery and others' too. A "pilgrim" to the South, Paul Mariani's poem captures the soulfulness of the Delta when he sees an old African American man who had "the face of the Delta, an *Ecce Homo* face, a face like Christ, the face of a brown man beaten down." So much Delta poetry marks the thorny path to redemption.

I thank Marcus Tribbett for the privilege of guest editing this special issue and I also express my gratitude to the poets and critics who have contributed to it. There is a wonderful cross-fertilization here where an essay about one Delta poet is written by another Delta poet and then in some instances one or both have further contributed an original poem. Delta poets writing about other Delta poets, a gathering of muses.



Old Bins, Itta Bena, Mississippi.
Photo by Jianqing Zheng.