Reviews

Delta Tears. By Philip C. Kolin. (Charlotte, NC: Main Street Rag, 2020. Pp. v – x + 82, $15.00, paper)

Great Delta poets of the past found ways to reconcile or juxtapose the troubled history of the region with admiration for the perseverance of its best people. They addressed these dichotomies deftly, creating well-worn paths that should not be retrod. It can therefore be hard for today's Delta poets to find room and avoid repeating the maudlin laments of blues songs, preaching emptily and accusing uncritically. That's why it's refreshing to find a book like Philip Kolin's *Delta Tears*. This collection proves Kolin is once again up to the challenge of navigating the Delta's troubled waters in novel ways.

Distinguished Professor of English at the University of Southern Mississippi and Editor Emeritus of the *Southern Quarterly*, Kolin is no stranger to the Delta and its culture. In *Delta Tears*, he paints familiar subjects using broad strokes. The book's six chapters are organized by distinct, interlocking themes: the Mississippi River (That Old Mud River); racial injustice (Centuries of Tears); blues music (Jukes and the Blues); animals (Delta Dogs and Other Critters); seasons and weather (Seasons); and finally place, memory, and the bridges between generations (Places to Store Memories). Within these groupings, themes and images recur, binding the book together like the mud of the Mississippi's banks.

The river is present on nearly every page, in word or spirit, reflecting its significance to the region's natural and human history. The first several poems position the Mississippi as foremost in the identity of the Delta, and by extension, show the reader the importance of the Delta to the nation. In "The Mississippi River's Proclamations," the river gives readers a natural history lesson in verse:

> I am . . .
> geology's darling
> millennia flow through my kingdom—
> 145 species of reptiles play in me . . .
> I am the rent the Gulf charges Canada. (p. 3)

The poem then switches to a darker, human history, flowing through time as the river itself flows—past missionaries, colonizers, slaveholders, brothel patrons. Elsewhere, the Mississippi is at once "The Father of Rivers" (p. 3), "the darkest place on earth" (p. 3), and "a flowing symphony" (p. 5). With each metaphor, Kolin alludes to images integral to the river: Algonkian-speaking Natives, the Delta as the "most Southern place on earth," and rich regional music, respectively. But perhaps the most salient metaphor is the Mississippi as "the longest tear duct in America" (p. 6). It is a watershed of grief, and each of the poems in this collection—each of Kolin's "Delta tears"—flows into that river regardless of where it falls.

Readers meet dozens of personalities shaped by the river: a fisherman who "wrote hunger pleas to God" (p. 7), a sharecropper affected by the Great Flood of 1927, ancient mound builders, descendants of African griots, emi-

grants of the Great Migration, street performers in New Orleans. Throughout, Kolin shows that none of these lives is untouched by racism. Prejudice, tragedy, and oppression are themes Kolin has explored in other works, notably his book *Emmitt Till in Different States: Poems* (Third World Press, 2015), and he returns to them here with violent, jarring imagery. He follows the example of Mamie Till, who insisted her son Emmett have an open-casket funeral so that no one could hide from the atrocities that befell him. Kolin unflinchingly exposes the violence that is integral to the Delta's story. "The Great Flood of 1927" describes sharecroppers forced to build levees:

> we tried pushing the Mississippi
> back from drowning white fields
> and houses all night long—we heaved
> the waves back while our mouths
> filled with mud and blood. (p. 8)

He tells of slaves who

> came across an ocean of bloody vomit, feces,
> chains, peeled bones, and limp eyes
> . . . [to where] [n]ight was so thick with keys
> and latches that even the stars were
> sold into muddy darkness. (p. 15)

He tells of the lynched, the beaten, the oppressed, the silenced.

And while Kolin ensures readers know the past, he reminds them that the Delta's story is unfinished, that we will revisit the same lessons until they are learned and actual change is effected. In "Yellow Jack," an homage to Mother DeLille, who gave succor to New Orleans's slaves stricken with yellow fever (i.e., Yellow Jack), he draws parallels to the COVID-19 pandemic:

> Now as Jack's paramour Corona breathes
> contagion, eclipsing
> the country, how can we entreat Mother DeLille to return? (p. 18)

In "Only Let Us Breathe," he describes the heroism of martyred freedom riders Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner in the context of George Floyd:

> Countless black faces have tried
> to warn us about tortures in cottonmouth
> fields, river towns, and gut-splattered
> streets only to have hate seeking
> bullets shatter their voices. "I can't
> breathe," "I can't breathe," their last words.
> (p. 23)

His description of Parchman Farm—the notorious Mississippi state prison—is not the nostalgic image readers may know from the songs of Charley Patton or Bukka White. Rather, it is a modern view of the penitentiary, a place of gang violence, suicide, and maggot-ridden water where even "[t]he air is in constant lockdown" (p. 22).

Where the book truly shines, though, is where Kolin balances this violence with the levity and hope that anchor people to the Delta. "Sheep, Caterpillars, and Fish" is an upbeat Delta bestiary reminiscent of the work of G.M. Hopkins. "Delta Visitors" is an ode to migrating ducks arriving at an inviting Delta wetland after a long journey. These bucolic works show the attraction the Delta holds for its residents. And throughout, Kolin recognizes the invaluable art that has been birthed by the Delta—B.B. King, Bessie Smith, Victoria Spivey, Same Cooke, and others all receive their due praise.

Such weighty topics might overwhelm the technical capabilities of a lesser poet, but Kolin consistently pulls fitting devices from his toolbox. In places, he employs second-person point of view to pull readers forcibly into uncomfortable situations. He varies his form to complement his subjects, using prose poems; unrhymed quatrains, tercets, and couplets; and even a haiku sequence. And his mastery of rhythm and sound is always evident:

> Soybeans, cotton, and rice reap
> ripeness in your sun-drenched Delta soil. (p. 4)

Delta Tears uses history to shine light on today's unfulfilled promises. Despite the grim truths revealed, Kolin leaves readers a sense of hope, a template for action, and a desire to bring change. *Delta Tears* captures the spirit of the Delta while stripping away its clichés, rewarding readers with a fresh look at this complex land, its people, its music. The result is a book that speaks with empathy and grace, at once haunting and hopeful.

~J. Todd Hawkins

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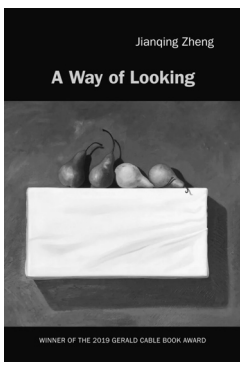
A Way of Looking. By *Jianquing Zheng*. (Eugene, OR: Silverfish Review Press, 2021. Pp. 80, $18.00, paper)

Editor, photographer, poet, Jianqing Zheng has major achievements in many areas. He founded three important journals—*Valley Voices*, which for over twenty years has published important poets and special issues on such topics as the New York School of Poetry and the history of cotton; *Poetry South*, again, with a distinguished roster of contributors, and the *Journal of Ethnic American Literature* that has focused on the literature, folklore, and architecture of diverse communities. As a photographer, Zheng's work is hauntingly beautiful capturing Delta landscapes ranging from historic hospitals to abandoned churches. *Arkansas Review* has published many of his images. But perhaps he is best known for his poetry--e.g., *The Landscape of the Mind*, *Enforced Rustification in the Chinese Cultural Revolution*, and now *A Way of Looking*, perhaps his best work thus far. Zheng has brought a dazzling multiculturalism to Mississippi Delta that spans continents, cultures, landscapes, and memories. A Chinese presence has long played a role in the Delta and Zheng's poetry pays tribute to his heritage while also infusing it into poems about the Delta.



A Way of Looking reinforces Zheng's place as a poet whose work exists in two worlds at once, traveling between the Delta and his hometown of Wuhan. There are poems in *A Way of Looking* about the Mississippi, the Yazoo River Bridge, a primitive Baptist church, juke joints, Itta Bena, Vicksburg, Helena, Arkansas, and New Orleans. Existing side by side with these Delta landscapes are poems about Chinese gardenia peddlers, young monks at shrines, Confucius and other Chinese philosophers, Chinese railroad builders, and moon festivals. Rather than seeing them as competing or even distinct settings, Zheng asks us to adopt a new, more subtle way of looking at them. His vision is synoptic, global, as one location helps us to understand and appreciate the other. Paradoxically, Zheng is both exile and resident. Section titles in *A Way of Looking* (On the Road, Farewell, Momentary Stay, Toward Forever) as well as many of the poem titles ("Departures," "Dreams," "Birds of Passage") point to Zheng as a voyager on a cultural journey.

Crucial to understanding how, and why, Zheng can do this is found in his mastery of the venerable Japanese genre of the haibun in which all of the poems in *A Way of Looking* are crafted. A haibun couples a prose poem coupled to one or more haiku. This is not an easy genre to write in, as Zheng points out in an afterword of sorts. "The prose poem and haiku stand independently, but they are also linked. In a sense, the haiku compliments the prose poem by juxtapo-

sition for an unexpected meaning." Commenting on Zheng's haibun, Dana Gioia in a blurb praises him for giving us "two succinct views of each moment in the personal narrative. It's as if he told an anecdote and then showed a photo that did not duplicate but amplified the story." Zheng's skill as a photographer carries over to his superbly shaped haibun. In a short haibun, "Waiting for Spring," Zheng reminds us in the prose poem that "When life stops clicking, body—a mass of elements—can be turned to ashes, used as a fertilizer for flowerbeds." But then the following haiku,

autumn dusk
a worn-out jacket
on the peg,

further and subtly compares the decomposition of the body into ashes to a worn-out jacket the body once wore, but now seen on its final resting place, the peg. Surprisingly beautiful yet arresting, Zheng's imagery paints a picture of the end of life in domestic terms but also in longer season ones with the allusion to autumn dusk, the color signifying the passing of day to night just as the body passes from flesh to ashes. In giving us two views of death, Zheng also emphasizes the beauty of such change as ashes fertilize flowers.

An especially moving poem (a prose tanka) about the Delta, again foregrounding Zheng's blending of photography and poetry, is "Weekend Drive, 1998," where the prose poem starts off, "After landing a university job in the Mississippi Delta, I fell in love with photographing blues sites . . . One Saturday I went to grab shots in Moorhead, where W. C. Handy's 'Yellow Dog Blues' immortalized the crossing of the Southern and Yazoo Delta railroads." Then comes the profoundly picturesque tanka, or five-line poem:

juke joint blues
a sluggish creek crooks
through town
by a lean-to shack
blooming wisteria

The image of the blocked creek and enfeebled, slanted shack captures a frequent blues lament about "crooked," abandoned relationships, places, times, but then we are treated to a visual and emotional epiphany with "blooming wisteria," the exuberance Zheng discovers underneath and through the blues. He has scored nothing short of a geography of the blues, but "Weekend Drive" is a multi-layered prose poem with five tanka, a coup if ever there was one in poetry. In the subsequent prose poem, Zheng declares: "I slid on, looking for the road sign while humming Little Milton's 'Blues Is Alright.' Seeing a young woman in a pink dress on the sidewalk, I slowed down to ask for direction, but she quickened her steps saying she was not local. I looked at myself in the rearview mirror: 'Am I stranger?'" Here is the topic sentence of *A Way of Looking*. But the following tanka answers Zheng's question as well as helps us to know how and why the lady in the pink dress functions in his ontology of self, ontology of place:

empty road
a country store
open to silence
on the tamale sign
bright sunshine

The images in the tanka unmistakably point to the Mississippi Delta and, furthermore, contextualize the poem in light of the blues (the "empty roads" is blue-centric). The tanka also subtley, delicately, but unequivocally answers Zheng's question about himself. He recognizes a familiar Delta icon—the tamale restaurant—not as a stranger but as a resident. It welcomes him with its connotations of fulfillment through a favorite, local food which, ironically, also symbolizes the multiplicities of culture at work here—Mexican, Delta, and Chinese.

Though the title of another haibun, "Night in the Mississisppi Delta," suggests that this poem, too, is about the Delta, it is a stream of consciousness poem about Duyi, a Chinese dissident who becomes an assistant professor of chemistry at a university in the Deep South. Though set in the Delta, the poem is deeply steeped in Chinese allusions/illusions. The haibun explores the associative thinking of this Chinese man who "wants to have a sound sleep but his mind roams like rain." In the course of the prose poem, we hear about his homeland, his cousin who wanted to come to the U.S. as a ping pong coach, and about his many dreams. Later, Duyi asks, "Will dead people dream?" The prose poem continues, "We cry when we come to this world; we leave cries to others when we die. How old is too old to live in this world? How soon can we see each other in the other world?" In response to these rather anxious questions, the following haiku offers a quiet and gentle refrain:

moonlight now
for the other side
of the river.

Zheng has found universal icons in the midst of his narrative about this Chinese man reflecting on the cultural revolution and death all in a moving dream sequence set in the Delta. Again, Zheng has joined two worlds. Duyi wonders if he will be in "his waking dream?" He is after all "desperate for a dream." The final haiku imaginatively yet concisely sums up the complex message of this haibun:

the Buddha says
this whole world is
a waking dream

"Night in the Mississippi Delta," perhaps the strongest poem in this very strong collection, powerfully expresses the juxtaposition of different times, places, and viewpoints that make Zheng's *A Way of Looking* a major book of poems.

~Philip C. Kolin

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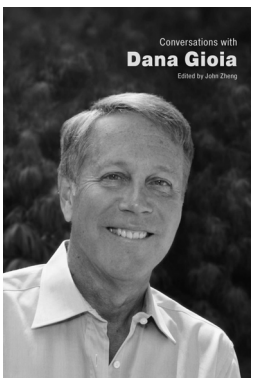
Conversations with Dana Gioia. Ed. John Zheng. (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2021. Pp. xv + 251, works, contents, acknowledgments, introduction, chronology, bibliography, index. $25.00, paper)

The year 2021 might seem odd timing for the Literary Conversations Series of the University of Mississippi Press to release a collection of twenty-two interviews with polymathic poet-critic, arts advocate, and public intellectual Dana Gioia. After all, amid such controversies as that surrounding Kenneth Goldsmith's infamous 2015 conceptualist performance of Michael Brown's autopsy report, conversations about American poetry have increasingly come to address this genre's relationship to and responsibility on matters of race. Gioia in all roles typically avoids that subject. Nevertheless, even the 25-year-old interviews reveal incisive insights in characteristically adroit, poetic language, ultimately proving—to praise him using his own terms—"readable" and "fresh" (p. 56) Hence Zheng has done scholars of poetry a service by editing *Conversations with Dana Gioia*, for seeing evolutions in Gioia's discourse and thinking about poetics over his career proffers useful windows into shifts in poetry criticism as



he witnessed them unfold in real time. Scholars should take up this well-done volume to better understand how those histories contribute to our fraught moment in the study of American verse.

Zheng has constructed a solid apparatus, including a comprehensive summary of works Gioia has published across genres and thorough chronology of his career. In addition, his introduction concisely, productively identifies strands that recur across interviews, indicating that he proved thoughtful in curating which among the over one hundred published interviews with Gioia to feature and how to edit to avoid repetition. This is not to call the editorial work flawless: it could have been useful context to incorporate blurbs concisely identifying interviewers' professions and background about each original outlet, factors that influence the foci of each piece. More importantly, certain interviews from similar eras despite Zheng's pruning can feel redundant; these include the 2001 discussions with Christina Vick and William Baer, and the several from the past decade. But in all, Zheng rendered judiciously his selections from the larger body of published interviews, to illustrate Gioia's "underlying integrity" (p. xvii)—or perhaps simply consistency in his views of aesthetics and politics—throughout his career. Not all readers will agree with Gioia's views. But this consistency means the volume aptly elucidates trajectories in scholarship on American verse.

Gioia as a public intellectual adamant about his ideological independence from the academy foresaw many scholarly debates. Reading these interviews published over a 25-year period demonstrates that he has always possessed an undeniably rigorous analytical eye, even if we dislike where he trains it or how. These interviews put on display that Gioia has in numerous ways been more thoughtful than some give him credit for: in recent conversations, he (*contra* strawman characterizations of him as immoveable) implicitly recognizes that debates he initiated over the impact of academia and creative writing on poetics are largely mute or outdated, because these forces are now inescapable.

Further, in these interviews he often presciently foregrounds topics that scholars in the academy only later took up. Gioia's viewpoints expressed outside those institutions turn out often to have been a decade or two ahead of those now widespread therein. Poetic techniques that he advocated and that are affiliated with New Formalism—although he disavows and disparages the label repeatedly herein—proliferate throughout many types of poetics, produced by non-academic and academic poets alike. He of course bemoaned declining readership for verse well ahead of Marjorie Perloff's infamous 2006 MLA Presidential address, foreshadowing her very terms by stating in 1992 that "there's never been a culture in which poetry has played so small a role, in which poetry has been so alienated from the common educated reader" (p. 22). Those interested in debates over how to define and study "lyric" should peruse these interviews to comprehend how such conversations evolved in and outside the academy. Gioia was keenly attuned to both contexts and the relationship between them. The "new lyric studies" has arguably emerged because, ironically, Gioia's scathing critique of academicization of American verse has infiltrated the university, as scholars have come to feel that their colleagues are not reading enough verse or in the right ways. Gioia presaged this shift and, intriguingly, also articulates in these interviews ideas about American verse that essentially theorize "lyricization" well before Virginia Jackson's definitive *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (2005).

Nonetheless, 2021 readers may well note that these conversations doggedly avoid the demons

of race that haunt them. This is of course because of Gioia's ideology: as late as 2003, he argues that "[w]hat matters" among critics "is not political allegiance but a stubborn determination to get at the truth rather than merely acquiesce to the currently popular platitudes" (p. 113) and maintains that "[t]o judge poetry as political speech is to misunderstand the art on the most basic level" (p. 113). Many of his more recent interviews, particularly after his tenure as NEA Chairman ended, center Catholicism and skirt "identity politics" altogether. But numerous interviews raise his poem "Counting the Children," even discussing its Chinese American persona—yet somehow none, even the most recent, grapple with the racial politics of this and similar techniques. Reading those moments and others herein in 2021 makes for an at times discomfiting experience.

Nevertheless, recent scholarship demonstrates that critics who may disagree with Gioia's aesthetic terms generate more thoughtful analyses if they are attuned to the widespread influence of his ideas. For instance, Javon Johnson and Anthony Blacksher in a piece on race and slam/spoken-word acknowledge that problematically racialized viewpoints of white slam poets in the 2000s related to their having imbibed Gioia's claims in his infamous 1991 essay "Can Poetry Matter?". Such work demonstrates that even critics of American poetry who may ultimately disagree with Gioia's views of verse can benefit from perusing his thinking, aptly reflected in this timely volume.

~Laura Vrana

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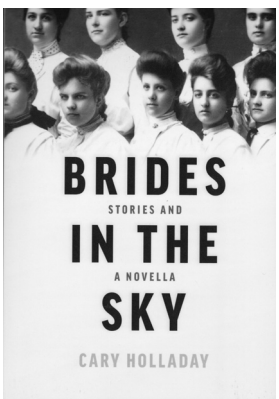
Brides in the Sky: Stories and a Novella. By Cary Holladay. (Athens: Swallow Press / Ohio University Press, 2019, Pp. 173. $18.95, Paperback)

Cary Holladay's *Brides in the Sky*, a collection of eight short stories and a novella, has a story called "Fairy Tales," in which one Sandy, a woman in her mid-forties, dreams of winning a reward that has been announced for any information on a missing girl, and getting married to the man she is living with. Desperate for money, the part-time daycare worker develops an obsession for winning the reward, which only takes her dream even further away from her. The story ends with her going into the woods and brushing pine needles, thinking she would say she'd lost her ring in the woods if she were asked what she was doing, her fairytale dream hung in the air. This story may not be the title story of the collection, but it sets the tone for rest of the stories.



The title story, "Brides in the Sky," is a powerful depiction of a mid-nineteenth century westward odyssey of two sisters, along with some of their neighbors and strangers met along the way. In a fairy tale fashion, the two sisters, along with four other ladies, think of themselves as Pleiades, the brightest two being the sisters themselves. But the journey ends in separation as Olivia, one of the sisters, decides to head to California, instead of continuing to Oregon, with a couple she is assisting. Years later, upon learning the truth that

her sister had perished on the way, Kate "hated the trail and her younger self for not knowing how to hold on to the sister she loved so much." Sibling love, family responsibility, and the collective fate of those who leave their land behind and head for the unknown have been beautifully displayed in this story. The story reads like historical fiction with all the vivid details of what the travelers experienced along the way—sickness, hunger, threat of robbery, and death on one hand, and love and care, unrelenting dreams, and resilience on the other.

"Comanche Queen" and "Interview with Etta Place, Sweetheart of the Sundance Kid" are historical stories that beautifully capture past eras with a new sensibility. "Comanche Queen" is the story of the famous Cynthia Ann Parker, kidnapped by the Comanche band in 1836 at the age of around nine and later found and brought back by Texas Rangers. This story joins the long line of stories written on Parker, starting with Alan Le May's 1954 novel, *The Searchers*. In the form of a short story, Holladay brilliantly captures Parker's state of mind, and more importantly she beautifully exhibits that different civilizations work within their own systems. Cynthia had fully immersed in the Comanche culture, and didn't want to "come back." She refused, though unsuccessfully, to live among her original people, the whites; she insisted on being called her Comanche, "her damn Indian name," Nautdah. "Me Nautdah," she says in the story. Holladay tells the factual story of what happens after her death but what is more interesting here is the story of Katherine, Cynthia's sister-in-law, whose life gets intricately tangled with Cynthia's.

"Interview with Etta Place" is a humorous story in the voice of Etta herself, in the form of an interview. Very little is said to have been known about this companion of two American outlaws, Harry Alonzo Longabough, alias Sundance Kid, and Robert LeRoy Parker, alias Butch Cassidy. In the story, Etta comes out of the darkness at the age of ninety-two, and begins to tell her story, starting with her first meeting with Sundance Kid. She is funny, romantic, and at times flippant. But she knows exactly why she needs to tell her story. She has been "sidestepped by history" and she is aware of it. She asks, "What if the star was me? If they made a show about my own real life? The girl that took Harry from tapeworms to Hollywood." This assertion by this woman at the age of ninety-two makes the story beautifully rebellious and soothing at the same time.

"Shades," "Ghost Walk," "Operator," and "Hay Season" can be grouped together as more light-hearted stories than the rest. In these stories, Holladay deals with outwardly inconsequential but powerful human motives that guide our actions. In "Shades," a sorority girl "kidnaps" a five-year-old boy from a parking lot because she loves him. When her friends question her, she replies, "Haven't you ever seen somebody and just loved them? . . . I saw his eyes and I had to." "Ghost Walk" tells of one Annie Robinson, who works at a bar and moonlights as a tour guide. A ghost story that she narrates to the visitors contains one Frances, whose mother had been killed by her fiancé, a rich man, who had a collection of cadavers. Annie reveals to the visitors that Frances was her great-great grandmother, and suddenly she feels an emptiness and fear. Unmarried at thirty-three, Annie asks her manager, "Why do people want to be scared, when there is so much to be afraid of that's real?" The boss doesn't probably get where she is going, but she feels accomplished, finally thinking of a stranger, whom she would take home and tell about a woman whose body had been turned to soap in the ghost story. This is probably the most psychological of Holladay's stories in this collec-

tion.

The novella, "A Thousand Stings," reads like a coming-of-age story and gives a similar taste to the rest of the stories, albeit in a more relaxed form. Shirley, the most prominent of the three major characters, "hangs back to watch" when her older sister and her friends chase "the handsomest boy in school." She "can't wait to grow up and drive. Yes, someday she can drive to Overhill Lake by herself the way teenagers do, their faces proud and smug behind dark glasses. Does that life await her? She hopes so." But the ending does not necessarily herald the anecdotal "learning" for the sisters. They grow, they change, they experience the world, but Holladay skillfully dodges the predictable. The fairytale doesn't quite materialize. The novella feels a little too slow at places. But the beauty of Holladay's writing lies in her spellbinding details and the depiction of the occurrences that are seemingly insignificant but hugely consequential to the characters.

Holladay's treatment of her characters is slightly ironic and humorous but incredibly compassionate. We are bound to love and empathize with all her characters, including the minor ones and those who are not necessarily heroic but are involved in acts that they believe are heroic. These stories tell of everyday people as they struggle to live their lives in their own ways, either with their families or in their small, personal worlds. The subtlety with which Holladay approaches her themes and her compassionate treatment of the characters make the stories feel smooth and appealing. There are deaths, kidnappings, sufferings, but there is no melodrama and over-excitement. There are no high tides and low tides, but a continuous flow of a river, like that of the Mississippi. *Brides in the Sky* is a "fairytalistic," soothing read.

~Khem K. Aryal

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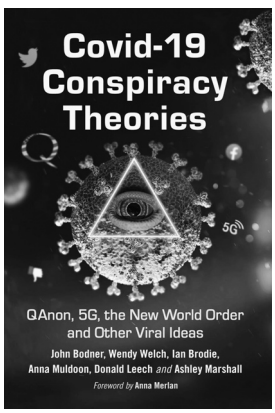
***Covid-19 Conspiracy Theories: QAnon, 5G, the New World Order and Other Viral Ideas*. By John Bodner, Wendy Welch, Ian Brodie, Anna Muldoon, Donald Leech and Ashley Marshal. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2021. Pp. 255, foreword by Anna Merlan, acknowledgments, notes, index, illustrations, black & white photographs. $30.00, paperback)**

The Brothers Grimm coalesced writing on traditional expressive culture to establish legend as one of the three major genres of folklore in the early 19th century. A general interest in documenting and studying legends predates their work, and the inquiry into legends continues as scholarship has burgeoned on legend and rumor within the past half century. The extensive intellectual history remains important in inquiries into legend as folklorists and other scholars have noted the persistence of themes, motifs, and other narrative patterns in legendry that stretch back millennia. This historical continuity is evident in both the telling of legends and the scholarship on the genre, and its presence remains important for understanding the existence and



influence of legend in contemporary society. Bodner, Welch, Brodie, Muldoon, Leech, and Marshal's new book is a major and timely contribution to legend studies. The authors began their research during the early stages of the pandemic. Their new publication is essential reading for those who wish to gain insight into the viral spread of rumors and legends connected to Covid-19.

Contemporary folklore scholarship is grounded in cultural relativism as researchers work to document and interpret legend and belief from insiders' perspectives. A willing suspension of disbelief can be a useful analytical position, but scholarship also involves cultural critique. Balancing the necessity of understanding why people hold beliefs in contrast to critically examining truth-claims asserted in the telling of tales has become a pointed dilemma in scholarship that is grounded in ethnographic theory and methods. Bodner et al. manage this tension admirably in this in-depth, challenging, and timely study. They use texts drawn primarily from computer web sites, blogs, discussion lists, and other cyber-resources as primary sources for their study. It is to their credit that they present a variety of legends and rumors in great detail and with efforts to be fair and empathetic to their tellers and believers. Nevertheless, there are wider ethical precepts within academic research, and the writers emphasize the need for using critical thinking to interpret contemporary legends and rumors. The balance between understanding and criticism is integral to scholarship in general, and it is essential for understanding narratives and beliefs connected with the pandemic.

The book is arranged in ten chapters. The organization follows an excellent flow as it begins with a primer for understanding the nature of conspiracy theory (CT) and then moves into a wide range of manifestations of CT in a great variety of contexts before concluding with a chapter that offers insightful ways to engage with believers of CTs. Writing a book with six authors must have been challenging, and the collaboration is largely seamless even though there are places where differing authorial tones do emerge. This diverse presence of tone actually adds to the book's appeal as each of the authors has specialized in specific areas of research, and they all bring their expertise together to offer documentation and analysis from a wide scope of research. There are few books on legend that can provide such detailed treatment of topics ranging from epidemiological narratives and conspiracy connected to legends and rumors in African-American culture to beliefs held by those opposed to vaccinations—Evangelical Christians, supporters of QAnon, and a wide range of people who accept and transmit conspiracy legends. The rumors and legends are widely diffused. It is particularly useful to explore how many of the CTs that are evident within our region are also in worldwide distribution, primarily through internet transmission. The book is a tour-de-force for demonstrating the value of studying folklore that is expressed on the internet.

The first chapter, titled "Conspiracy Theory 101: A Primer" may become the definitive introduction to CT. The writers make the important distinction between conspiracy and conspiracy theory. Acknowledging that conspiracy and collusion are clearly present within all societies, the writers explain that various conspiracies do have verifiable existence and influence on social and political realities. They also explore how kernel narratives—the phrase-like beliefs that form a basis for legend—may have actual existence. For example, the kernel narrative "George Washington was a Mason, and there were American presidents prior to his inauguration" does have a basis in fact. This narrative, however, becomes a

conspiracy legend when it is expanded into a belief that the Masons were in league with the Illuminati to set the series of presidents of the America's Confederation Congress in order to found the beginnings of the New World Order. So, how does belief in conspiracy differ from conspiracy theory? The authors draw from rich scholarship to explore common themes within CT. Synthesizing perspectives offered by Scott Reid, Peter Knight, Richard Hofstadter, and others, they explain that a CT is evident when believers characteristically see a small and clandestine group who work in secrecy to direct harmful events. Important elements of CT include the idea that the nefarious actions are directed through clandestine processes, and that some outsiders may been given some access to the inner-workings of the esoteric groups who wield political and economic power. The CT is supported by various forms of expressive culture, including beliefs, rumors, personal experience narratives, memorates, legends, and myth. The presence of CTs in marginalized communities, or by groups of people who feel their identity is threatened, is also a common feature of conspiracy thinking. A major characteristic of CTs is that their believers often accepts conspiracy as an all-encompassing explanation for understanding catastrophe and cataclysm. These theories tend to become engrained in the worldview and ideologies of their holders.

CTs connected to Covid-19 follow numerous patterns that are evident in legends connected to other conspiracies. They may be grounded in appeals to scientific explanations, but the body of information often is in opposition to mainstream knowledge. The legends also are frequently connected to personal experiences, but the connection often is based in accounts of other people's experiences. The writers arranged a number of the chapters around typologies offered by other researches. Michael Barkum's work is especially valuable as he delineates how conspiracies are typically connected to events (such as the origins of the SARS-COV-2 virus), systems and organizations (such as the CDC), and the belief in superconspiracies that connect a wide range of systems (such as the idea that the United Nations is a front for the Illuminati). The chapters all explore these topics in great detail, and the presence of actual texts from CT believers makes the writers' claims vivid and often unnerving. The paranoia of postmodern fiction, such as Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, has real-world manifestations in much of the discourse of those who hold conspiracies. The range of evil actors who show up in the stories and beliefs include outside enemies who managed the Wuhan lab, enemies within society who may be believed to be clandestine Satanists, and those in the Deep State who have stymied benevolent forces for good. The analysis demonstrates reasons why people hold these beliefs, and readers enter a disturbing world in which Donald Trump is cast as a savior who is engaging in spiritual warfare against proponents of a One World Government.

Clearly, these rumors and theories are rooted in strong emotional connections. There is solid evidence that we are hard-wired for belief as we intuitively look for patterns to make sense out of our world. We have to rely on a scarcity of first-hand evidence even though we are swamped with information-overload through mass and social media. The scholarship on legend demonstrates that we are not fully rational as we rationalize our beliefs and people from all backgrounds can hold two different and opposing beliefs within their own ideologies. These are more dynamics that are present in the numerous texts that are associated with Covid-19 CTs. The writers provide insight into reasons why people believe that Hillary Clinton heads an illegal ring of child sex traf-

fickers or think that mRNA vaccines carry computer codes that are a precursor to placing the Mark of the Beast of Revelations into our bodies, and they offer a wide range of CTs that can be easily debunked with even a modicum of critical thinking.

The writers do not pull their punches in this book. The reading can be intense, and the ideas need to be absorbed oftentimes in small bits. It is not an optimistic tome, and the book shows negative aspects of folklore. Legend, rumor, belief can isolate their holders as they may reinforce the notions of people who think themselves to be marginalized. The CTs further build up walls in the information silos that separate groups from each other and serve to close down rational discourse. The beliefs are often recycled, and even showing how pernicious beliefs—such as the Blood Libel that has been associated with anti-Semitism for longer than a millennium—may do nothing to challenge the beliefs of those who associate a Jewish cabal with the NWO. The writers show that these CTs inevitably will be created and recycled, and that conspiracies associated with Covid-19 and other diseases are not going away. The book is written in a conscientious and empathetic effort to contribute to a better understanding of belief. It is admirable how the authors also move beyond academic inquiry into applied folklore. That last chapter suggests important ways to not only talk with others who may hold differing beliefs but also ways to examine our own assumptions and presuppositions about belief. Critical thinking and constructive dialogue are not easy processes, especially during these challenging times. The contributions of Bodner, Welch, Brodie, Muldoon, Leech, and Marshall will take time to actualize, and their important new volume gives readers a wealth of resources for dealing with challenges that emerge in discourse with others during the pandemic.

~Gregory Hansen

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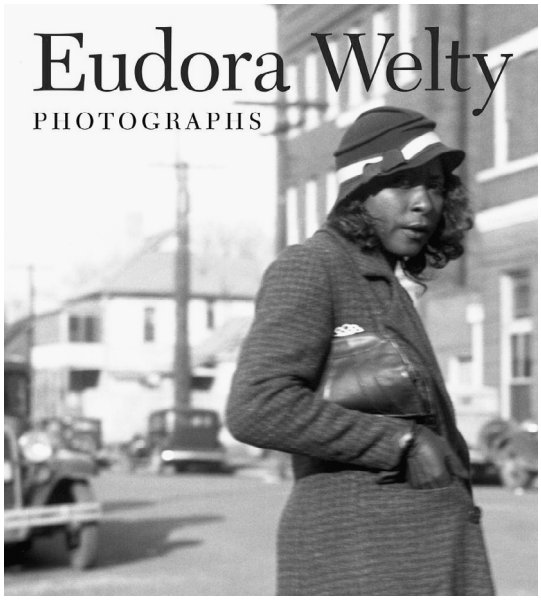
***Photographs: Updated and Expanded*. By Eudora Welty. (University Press of Mississippi: Jackson, MS, 2019. Pp. vlii + 242 photographs, foreword by Natasha Trethewey, foreword by Reynolds Price, introduction. $50.00, cloth)**

Eudora Welty's *Photographs* originally appeared in 1989 with photographs selected from the Eudora Welty Collection held at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Recognizing the interest in Welty's photographs, the University Press of Mississippi returned to the Archives and reissued a new edition of *Photographs* with images reproduced from digital scans of Welty's negatives and sixteen additional photographs. *Photographs: Updated and Expanded* in-



cludes a new foreword by Natasha Trethewey, the original foreword by Reynolds Price, and the original introduction titled "Eudora Welty and Photography: An Interview." The result is a beautiful and definitive collection of the Pulitzer Prize winning Mississippi writer's photographs from the 1930s, '40s, and '50s.

In her foreword for the updated edition, "That's Just the Way It Was," Natasha Trethewey recalls receiving Eudora Welty's *Photographs* in 1990 during her first year in graduate school and at the start of her own writing career. Trethewey calls the photographic evidence of what Welty had seen in her life "transformative" (ix). With a grandmother who had come of age in 1930s Mississippi, Trethewey found in Welty's photographs a complement to the stories she had grown up hearing from her grandmother: "Welty's photographs were, for me, a resource, a way to see a time and place I'd only encountered in history books and my grandmother's stories. I began writing poems with those images in mind, each one a starting place to anchor visually what I'd heard in the cadences of my grandmother's voice, how she'd say—reaching the end of a story—That's just the way it was" (pp. x-xi).

In his original foreword, reprinted in the new edition, Reynolds Price discusses Welty's work with the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s, during which she travelled the state as a publicity agent documenting Depression-era survival strategies such as gardening, quilting, construction projects, and literacy initiatives. In addition to and concurrent with her WPA work, Welty took "snapshots," as she called them, of people and places throughout Mississippi. Commenting on the portraits of black and white Mississippians, Price notes the compassion of the photographer's eye and the dignity of her subjects. In her photographs, "Welty employed and shared with unmistakable intensity the same acuity and patience of vision which distinguishes her fiction. . . . In book after book Welty has chosen or accepted the role of intent observer" (p. xix).

In addition to both forewords, *Photographs* includes the 1989 interview conducted by Hunter Cole and Seetha Srinivasan of University of Mississippi Press for the first edition of *Photographs*. Welty answers a wide range of questions about the cameras she used, her early experimentation with photography and subsequent learning process, her travels through the state for the WPA in the thirties, connections between her photography and her writing, and her friendships with other photographers and other writers. When asked if photography taught her anything about writing, Welty said no but that "a kindred impulse made me attempt two unrelated things—an inquiring nature, and a wish to respond to what I saw, and to what I felt about things, by something I produced or did" (p. xxiii).

The two forewords and interview offer background and insights about the life and times of the photographer, her purpose, and her vision. Welty's photographs take over the book from there. The two hundred and forty two photographs are numbered, titled, dated, and beautifully reproduced with rich black and white tones on heavy paper. The majority of the images are set in Mississippi and taken during the 1930s. The photographs in the late pages of the book are from the forties and fifties, some of which have regional subjects but many are from Welty's travels outside the state and country.

Although there are no divided or titled sections, the book is loosely organized by subject or theme as well as chronology. The first several photographs are of women, primarily but not exclusively African American women. Some of the women look directly at the camera while others are at work or leisure, in fields or yards, on streets

or porches. All of the photographs were taken "spontaneously," as Welty describes it, "to catch something as I came upon it, something that spoke of life going on around me" (p. xxi). The next several photographs are of men, in similar settings, singly or in groups, some looking at the camera, some engaged in work or talk with one another. Photographs of children follow the first two sections, again with echoes in setting and theme to the images of their adult counterparts.

After the series of photographs of women, men, and children, the book shifts to street scenes (courthouse steps, railroad tracks, store fronts, town squares), some taken for architectural interest but most to document the human activity that takes place in communal spaces with titles like "Conversation," "Saturday strollers," "Making a date," and "Watching a fire." The book continues to move organically through the loosely grouped subjects: state fairs and parades, billboards and signs, cemeteries and churches, waterways and farm lands, and labor and leisure. The last few pages are reserved for snapshots of Welty's family and friends. Without labels or rigid categories for the photographs, the viewing experience is guided but fluid, leisurely, and recursive.

When asked in 1989 what she saw looking back on her Depression-era photographs, Welty replied, "I see a record. The life in those times" (p. xxiii). Welty elaborates when asked about the African American woman in the first photograph in the book, "Woman of the thirties": "She has a very sensitive face, as you can see; she was well aware of her predicament in poverty, and she had good reasons for hopelessness. Well, she wasn't hopeless. That was the point. She was courageous. She thought it was a hopeless situation, but she was tackling it" (p. xl). Eudora Welty's photographs reveal much about a time and place in history and the people who inhabited it. But they also reveal something about the person behind the camera, the shy young woman who saw the dignity, humanity, and resilience of those lives and stepped forward to ask, "Do you mind if I take this picture?" (p. xxiii).

–Janelle Collins

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