

Tributaries

ON THE NAME OF THE JOURNAL:

Alabama's waterways intersect its folkways at every level. Early settlement and cultural diffusion conformed to drainage patterns. The Coastal Plain, the Black Belt, the Foothills, and the Tennessee Valley remain distinct traditional as well as economic regions today. The state's cultural landscape, like its physical one, features a network of "tributaries" rather than a single dominant mainstream.

—Jim Carnes, from the Premiere Issue

Tributaries

Journal of the Alabama Folklife Association

Joey Brackner

Anne Kimzey

EDITORS

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The Alabama Folklife Association
c/o The Alabama Center for Traditional Culture
410 N. Hull Street
Montgomery, AL 36104

Al Thomas
PRESIDENT

Jim Hall
TREASURER

Joyce Cauthen
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

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Editors' Note

Volume 7 of *Tributaries* touches upon the three primary ethnic streams that formed Alabama culture—Native American, European, and African. Our authors present topics of close personal interest.

LORI SAWYER shares a personal narrative from the Creek Indian community of Poarch, Alabama. Her account of her bond with her mother and the special meaning of their participation in a folk tradition will resonate with many readers.

We thank KERN JACKSON, former president of the Alabama Folklife Association, for his paper on black Mardi Gras. Kern intertwines his personal narrative of this special event with an analysis of how Mardi Gras functions and how what was once known as Colored Mardi Gras has changed over the last few decades.

Though not a personal narrative, TINA NAREMORE JONES draws upon her dissertation research to give us an account of Ruby Pickens Tartt, the grandmother of Alabama folklore. The multi-dimensional Tartt used her knowledge of local folk customs in a series of short story sketches. Jones analyzes these stories for insights into Tartt's attitudes and relationships with her African American folk informants, the white community of Sumter County, and the folklore intelligentsia of the 1930s.

Our reviewers offer descriptions of several new documentary products relating to Alabama folk culture, including two presentations of the African-American shape-note tradition in southeast Alabama.

ANNE KIMZEY is now serving as co-editor for *Tributaries*. For fifteen years, Anne has conducted folklife fieldwork in Alabama, produced exhibits and radio documentaries, and written articles on Alabama traditional culture. She has long provided editorial assistance for various publications of the Alabama State Council on the Arts.

We hope that you will visit the Alabama Folklife Association website—

Alabamafolklife.org. At this site you can order this and past issues of *Tributaries*, most of the documentary items that have been reviewed by us, and other products that will enhance your understanding of Alabama folk culture. For your convenience, we have also included information about the Alabama Folklife Association and its documentary products at the back of the issue.

We appreciate the many suggestions by AFA members and others. I also wish to acknowledge the annual copyediting efforts of Randall Williams. He provides valued continuity for the journal. Vinnie Watson, the administrative assistant at the Alabama State Council on the Arts, has also assisted in the production of this issue. We welcome your suggestions, comments and contributions for future issues.

JOEY BRACKNER
Alabama Folklife Program
Alabama State Council on the Arts
201 Monroe Street
Montgomery, AL 36130-1800
334-242-4076, x225
joey@arts.state.al.us

ANNE KIMZEY
Alabama Center for Traditional Culture
410 North Hull Street
Montgomery, AL 36104
334-242-3601
anne@arts.state.al.us

Roots Running Deep: Picking Mayhaws

Lori A. Sawyer

Mom's voice on the phone sounds unusually excited. "Mrs. T__ called. She said the mayhaws are ready."

"Oh, good," I say, peeling my attention from the spreadsheet on my computer screen.

"If we're gonna go get any, we need to go now, like this afternoon, and maybe early in the morning, too."

Her tone changes slightly to concerned. "Once they're on the ground, if it rains and that hot sun hits them, they'll bust open..."

"Yeah, I know." I reply. "We'll go over this evening, as soon as I get through with work."

"Good. I hope you didn't have anything planned this weekend, because, well, they won't last."

I am so glad it is Friday, and one of the first unscheduled weekends I've had in months. It's been a hectic week of working overtime nearly every day and I am exhausted. I honestly cannot imagine getting to a stopping point before dark. "I don't have anything else planned," I reassure us both. "We'll get the mayhaws."

I am shutting down my computer at 5:30 when the phone rings again. I hear the urgency in her voice.

"Is everything OK?"

"Yes, I just finished, I'm sorry I'm running late. What time does it get dark?"

"7:30."

"I'll be there in ten minutes."

I drive to my house, throw on jeans and a long-sleeved shirt, and grab

mosquito repellent.

When I get to Mom's, she has a water bottle, stool, bucket, turkey roasting pan, and her mother's white enamel dishpan for me to load into the car.

"You know that was Momma's white dishpan," she tells me as I shut the car door. Of course I know, but she is emphasizing a point. "That's the pan she and Daddy always used for making mayhaw jelly."

"Then we definitely need to bring it with us," I say.

It is May in the Deep South, and already hot. As I drive through rural farmland and pine forests, a dark, flashing storm cloud looms in the distance. In a matter of minutes we arrive at a small cypress swamp surrounded by cotton fields, and the sky is heavy with the promise of rain. In my mind, I am bargaining with Nature to cut us a break. If the distant lightning gets too close, we will have to leave from underneath the trees. Strong wind could knock all the fruit to the ground before it is ripe. Rain would cut the harvest time, causing the berries to quickly sour on the damp ground. A heavy rain might fill the swamp bed with water, making fish nets and snake boots necessary to scoop the floating berries. I shudder at the memory of a cottonmouth moccasin swimming toward me years ago.

We pull off the road, cross a shallow ditch and drive along the edge of the field to the cypress swamp behind Mrs. T__'s home. I am relieved to see the ground is still relatively dry and covered in beautiful red berries. Mrs. T__ is in her yard, tending rose bushes and phlox that once belonged to her mother. She comes to the back gate to join us, offering her mosquito spray. I unload the car and we begin our methodical routine, a half-century of family ritual.

Mrs. T__ leads us to a productive hawthorn tree at the edge of the swamp. The berries on the thorny branches are relatively small, about $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch wide, and range in color from light green to yellow to red. They look like soft, shiny crabapples. Those that fell a few days ago and landed on damp soil have already begun to rot underneath. Stepping carefully around the fruit, we sit on the ground encircling the tree, facing one another. Mom sits on her stool with a water bottle and her mother's dishpan beside her. Mrs. T__, who is at least ten years older than my mother, stretches out on a patch of grass, leaning easily on one arm. In my youth I had always picked mayhaws on my own, away from the adults. I had moved around in a deep squat, like a crab, quickly

scouring first one spot then another. But this year my knees protest and I join the older ladies. I am resigned to sitting on a plastic bag and picking within arm's length.

Both my mother and Mrs. T__ are hard-of-hearing and fond of conversation, so we chat loudly and constantly as we work. Berries patter against enameled pans like rain on a tin roof, in rhythm with our laughter echoing across the fields. The women pick fruit from the ground effortlessly, instinctively, pausing only to repeat an unheard remark or to emphasize a point. I slip a mayhaw in my mouth; the taste is almost sweet, almost tart, and almost really good. I must admit, though, this humble fruit is deceptively plain. There is little here to indicate the flavor waiting to be born in a jar of mayhaw jelly. I glance at my mother, grinning as I spit out the seeds. She smiles and says, "I see you



FIGURE 1

Ripe mayhaw berries on the ground.



FIGURES 2, 3.

Mayhaw berries on the tree, and in the hand.

over there eatin' them."

I marvel at Mrs. T__'s huge cypress trees. Nearly everyone in this region has drained their cypress ponds for farmland and cut the old trees for the cash they bring. This modest woman has resisted, even though I know she could use the money. I've read that mayhaw trees are killed by competing undergrowth, and the full canopy of large trees protects the mayhaws from overcrowding. It's hard to find native mayhaws now, and most people my age don't even know what they are. I ask Mrs. T__ if her children appreciate the mayhaws and if they would continue to protect them. She says she thinks so, since they grew up playing in this swamp.

I look at the fallen fruit and young mayhaw trees shooting up from the roots of older trees. These young mayhaws survive because the cypress protect

them and the existing roots of the older mayhaws provide a strong foundation. I understand this interdependence. These trees are here thanks to Mrs. T__'s protection. I am here today picking this fruit because of my mother and the tradition her parents began over fifty years ago.

My mother's grandmother was born in the Poarch community of Huxford (then called "Local"), and her family (many of the Indians, in fact) traditionally picked mayhaws each year at a mayhaw patch in Huxford. Mr. T__'s patch became available in later years, and was much closer to the family living a few miles south. Mom recalls her mother and Uncle O. D. took her to pick mayhaws at the ancestral Huxford patch. I guess I've taken for granted how far back it really goes . . . probably all the way back.

My grandmother was a true child of the Great Depression. Her contractor father died in his forties, leaving a wife and seven young children suddenly destitute. To support them, her brother worked as a cook for railroad crewmen who called him "Boy." My grandmother understood at a very early age the pain of hunger, loss, and racial discrimination. Her stories emphasized the value of extended family support, creative problem solving, education, and perseverance.

My grandfather's parents successfully farmed deep in the pine forests of the Southeast. One of twelve children raised by a devout Holiness mother, my grandfather was intensely spiritual, but not outwardly 'religious'. He had a wonderful sense of humor, loved openly and unconditionally, and held a deep respect for life and its timing. He farmed part-time and enjoyed both harvesting food and preparing it. He was a cook for the U.S. Coast Guard throughout World War II and fed many a body—and soul—during his life.

After the war, my grandfather returned home to his wife, her invalid mother, and a young daughter born while he was in service. He soon landed a job at a local paper mill, and began riding to work with a Mr. T__. Mr. T__ owned a cypress pond with native mayhaws, and each year he allowed my grandfather to pick his mayhaws for jelly. My grandfather made excellent jelly, and appreciated mayhaw as one of the finest.

My mother was nine or ten years old when her father began picking Mr. T__'s mayhaws. She tagged along occasionally, though as a child she was only mildly interested. My mother recalled that her father always managed to make



FIGURES 4, 5

The thorny mayhaw tree, and a closeup of its leaves and berries.

time for picking mayhaws each year, and always managed to make at least one batch of jelly from the harvest. If the crop was poor one year, he would ‘scrap’ together just enough berries for a batch. Sometimes he had to add a little more water, and sometimes he cooked the berries twice.

As my mother got older and started her own family, she began receiving her own invitation call from Mrs. T__. My mother and grandfather both picked mayhaws each year, and the jelly was a constant flavor in our homes. My grandmother had to stay home to care for her mother, but she helped make the jelly. She also baked homemade biscuits with jelly and mayhaw jelly cakes, like her mother and grandmother before her.

As a child, I occasionally went with my mother to the mayhaw patch, but I took the process, and the resulting jelly, completely for granted. It was interesting for a short time, but then I would get hot, or thirsty, or bitten by mosquitoes or have to go to the bathroom and would quickly be ready to leave. As I got older, I was always busy with “more important things.” I graduated college, married, and moved to Washington, D.C., to work. A few years later,

my grandfather died. I was three months pregnant with my daughter. After she was born, my husband and I moved back to my hometown to raise our child, and the yearly pilgrimage to the mayhaw patch began to hold deeper meaning for me.

After more than thirty years at the paper mill, Mr. T— also retired and soon passed away. By then our families were connected by a common custom, and Mrs. T__ continued calling my mother each year.

My baby was still nursing the first time my mother and I took her to Mrs. T__'s mayhaw patch. We picked as best we could, and left when my daughter got hungry and fussy. Each year afterward, my mother would laugh and point to the spot where I pulled off the road to nurse a crying baby who could not wait until we got home.

From the time my daughter could walk, my grandmother had her in the kitchen teaching her how to cook. I have video footage of my two-year-old daughter standing in a chair, busily washing mayhaws in the kitchen sink. She knows she is helping do something very important. I ask her what she has and she holds one up and says “My-HAW.” The camera pans over to reveal the details of our mayhaw jelly production, including jelly jars and towels covering the counter, and a large enamel pot simmering on the stove.

My grandmother eventually moved in with my mother, and together they managed to keep up the mayhaw tradition. Mrs. T__ called when the fruit was ripe and about to fall. My mother picked the mayhaws after work and washed and cooked the juice down the next evening. My grandmother made the jelly. If both were busy with another project, such as planting the garden, they simply froze the juice in empty plastic soda bottles. The juice was thawed when kitchen space, jelly jars, pectin, and time were all available at the same moment.

My grandmother died unexpectedly when my daughter was nine. After this, my mother's and my busy work schedules began to impact many family traditions, including mayhaw jelly production. Most years my mother managed to pick the fruit, but sometimes the juice didn't make it past the freezer.

When my daughter was twelve, my mother woke with a high fever and slipped into a coma. Paralyzed and unresponsive for days, she was given no hope for survival. Her time had not come, though. Following weeks in critical

care, and a subsequent open-heart surgery, she began the slow, painful process of recovery. After nearly nine months of recuperation, she received the call from Mrs. T__: "The mayhaws are ready."

Sitting beside me under the cypress trees behind Mrs. T__'s house, my mother looked rejuvenated. Her formerly paralyzed hand worked busily, joyfully with the berries. This was only her second full day outside the house since her illness, and I could tell this was exactly what she needed. She shared with Mrs. T__ her adventure of near-death and second chances. She described how much she looked forward to returning to work and being able to drive again. She said she missed working in the garden and walking in the woods, because that was when she felt most in tune with Nature and "that quiet voice that guides me." She shared how much she appreciated having the opportunity to live just a little longer. She wondered how she should make the best use of what she considered "bonus time."

Mrs. T__ was amazed at both the extent of my mother's illness and the miracle of her recovery. She commented that one would never know what she had been through simply by looking at her. Mrs. T__ added, "You remind me so much of your mother now." My mother's voice faltered with emotion as she told Mrs. T__, "You just don't know how happy I am that you called me. This has been the happiest day of my life, since I've been sick. It's so good to be a part of this continuity, I feel connected to my momma and my daddy, and to life. I needed that so much."

As I watch these two magnificent women, I see their beautiful simplicity and strength. For the first time, really, I feel a part of this continuity. I feel roots running deep beneath me. I'm overwhelmed with gratitude, for being a part of something so sweet and special and very rare indeed.

At the same time, I sense impending change, finality. New generations are entering this landscape. Will they care enough to continue traditions they did not create, protecting ritual begun before they were born? I want to be hopeful, but it is hard. I try to envision the survival of these trees, Mrs. T__'s children continuing her legacy, and my child remaining a part of this. I also understand all too well that people come and go, things change and you can't cling to the past. Even so, I'm not ready to let all this quietly slip away. How can I bridge this connection between my daughter and the grandfather she



FIGURE 6

The author's mother, Gail Thrower, with her mother's white dishpan.

never knew, between her and the lovely fruit of his labor?

While I want my daughter to find her own voice, I also want her to understand her place among the others in this continuum. I hope she feels strengthened by the love around her and the roots beneath her. There are so many stories, recipes, values, and traditions that bring past lives into the present. We share many of these now, and I know she's listening. She's so much like my mother now, I can almost imagine my grandchildren.

I learned from my mother's illness that when facing death, you don't pray for more money or materialism. You pray for more time, just one more day of life. One more day is such a blessing. I am so thankful my mother was given more time to share with us, to help keep our traditions alive. I am also proud of the delicate mayhaw seedlings Mrs. T__ has given us. Native mayhaws are hard to grow on our land, so every new leaf is an event. Again, I remain hopeful.

The wind is high in the trees from the approaching storm, and it is getting dark. I don't know what the future holds, but for now, I know what comes next. We will load our pans and berries into the car, and continue talking until we can barely see one another. Our voices will harmonize with the shrill buzz of mosquitoes, thick in the damp night air. If we are lucky, perhaps we will return tomorrow and pick mayhaws one more time. ■

Confronting the Big House and Other Stereotypes in the Short Stories of Ruby Pickens Tartt

Tina Naremore Jones

Susan Snider Lanser believes that any woman who writes and seeks to publish looks for discursive authority. She sees such writing as a “quest to be heard, respected, and believed, a hope of influence” (1992:7). The desire to be heard and to influence can be seen in Alabama folklorist Ruby Pickens Tartt’s own reflections of her writing: “I’ve tried to make them [her short stories] true to life, a sincere, sympathetic interpretation of the Negro mind & character as I’ve found it.”¹ Some critics might rightly claim that Tartt’s privileged racial position in the 1940s as a white woman from an upper-class family of the Black Belt region of Sumter County clouds her ability to see her own inconsistencies in racial relationships. While this may be true, her own words tell us that she understands herself as being sympathetic to her black neighbors. Her statement of purpose makes clear that she does not wish to make sweeping generalizations; instead she intends to discuss life as she has “found it.”

Arguably, her attempt to speak for another rings with a patronizing attitude that contradicts her purpose. But within Tartt’s intention of describing “the Negro mind and character as [she has] found it,” she simultaneously decrees that she will examine the white mind and character as she finds it. In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison reminds us that interpretations of black and white are not separate, but rather integrally related.² Through America’s history of slavery, attitudes formed about authority, autonomy, savagery, sophistication, freedom, and bondage. These attitudes manifest themselves in our literature whether they are literally present or not (1993:65-66). Discussions of race, whether white or black, evoke the image of the other even when absent from the conversation. Identities of each race formed in relation to the other race; therefore, they are



FIGURE 1
Ruby Pickens Tartt.

not easily dissected and must not be separated in our analysis of literature.

The first step in analyzing the work of Tartt traditionally would be to concentrate on her identity as a white woman who presumes to speak for the other through her marginalized position based on gender. Such a step, however, presents only half of the picture. For within her short stories appear statements concerning the South's history and an examination of racial relationships. The personality that inspired her imagination to create these stories which stand as portraits of herself and the black folksingers and storytellers was her own community, with all its contradictions and complexities. Even so, recording

the people and places of Sumter County in writing seemed a formidable task. Examinations of correspondence of the era reveal Tartt's reluctance to assume the role of speaker through her writing. The published material of the era also brings to light Tartt's achievement of a political voice that, while commenting on the condition of African Americans, ultimately speaks to the role the whites played in creating a position of second-class citizenship for blacks.

On November 15, 1943, John A. Lomax wrote a letter to Pratt Tartt, husband of Ruby Pickens Tartt, urging him to persuade his wife to write. In the letter he wrote, "I don't believe that I have convinced Mrs. Tartt that her Negro stories are priceless, that a collection of them would be certain to find

a publisher and that meanwhile single stories could be sold and printed in magazines” (Tartt Collection, RPT to JAL, November 15, 1943). He directed her to write stories about “Dock, Vera, Enoch, Hettie Godfrey and any other good subject among her Negro friends” (*Ibid.*). He persisted with more direct comments that tell Tartt, “You’ll know how to ‘paint’ Dock’s stolidness, that vacant stare, the transformation when he ‘shouts’ or sings, with his powerful voice, his wonderful spirituals” (Tartt Collection, RPT to JAL, January 12, 1944). She immediately replied to Lomax’s wife, Ruby Terrill, “He’s the only one who could do Dock. I can’t.”³ Lomax’s verb choice of “paint” acknowledges Tartt’s ability as a portrait painter and suggests that he thought she could achieve some of the same effects in creating stories. To explain her mother’s work, Tartt’s daughter, Fannie Pickens Inglis said:

[S]he was gifted in getting a likeness—many artists can draw and still not get a likeness . . . Many portrait painters paint all of their models to look very much alike—showing no individual personality traits. Ruby always showed personal character in hers . . . the figure never looked like a paper doll cut out and pasted on the canvas (VPB papers, FPI to VPB, January 17, 1979).

Much of the correspondence between Lomax and the Tartts in 1943 and 1944 resembles the previous references with Lomax assuring Ruby Pickens Tartt that her work was marketable and Tartt convinced otherwise. To Lomax, she wrote, “No one on earth feels that way about my stuff but you” (Lomax Collection, RPT to JAL, October 1943). Others did care; Donald Day, the editor of the *Southwest Review* wrote Tartt after Lomax showed him some of her letters, “We’ve got just enough of some of Josh and Rich Amerson and others to make it imperative that we have more” (Tartt Collection, November 16, 1943). Despite her hesitancy, Tartt wrote a short story entitled “A Pair of Blue Stockings” and sent it to Lomax. He forwarded the story to Day, who bought the story for fifty dollars. The story featured Josh and Alice Horn, one of the couples from whom Tartt had collected folk songs and folk stories during her work with the WPA during the 1930s. The story expresses attitudes of love, sacrifice and respect. “A Pair of Blue Stockings” appeared in the 1944

Winter volume of *The Southwest Review* as a three-part story titled “Alabama Sketches.”⁴ “Alabama Sketches” outlines Tartt’s initial strategy of narrative voice when seeking to bring to light the story of the black community of Sumter County. This strategy involves no direct criticism or interpretation, merely transcription of an event which evolves into the telling of a folktale, singing of a folksong, and/or the explanation of a folk superstition.

The stories of Tartt that feature male protagonists typically depict a white female narrator who does not directly participate in the tale.⁵ In “Richard, the Tall-Hearted,” the narrator’s Ford “slips” into a ditch following a rainstorm, and she is forced to seek the help of some black men in a log cabin. The narrator describes Amerson as a “huge Negro Man with solid sloping shoulders and a wide mouth held tight at the corners” (Foley 1949:307).⁶ Instead of helping the other men with the car, Amerson begins to tell stories, and he assumes the narrative.

Madelyn Jablon reminds us that both feminists and scholars of African American women’s writing equate voice with power and silence with passivity (1997:47). Tartt’s white female narrator, in letting Amerson tell his own tale, passes the power of speech to Amerson and forces the white reader to listen to someone they normally would not. He explains, “You see, Miss, I didn’t come up ’round here in dese red hills, an’ I ain’t no help in dis sort of mud” (Foley 1949:307). In the correspondence between Tartt and Lomax, Amerson’s tales are referenced as examples of tall tales in the tradition of the Munchausen tales of Germany (Lomax Collection, RPT to JAL, December 26, 1942).

The author of these tales was Rudolph Erich Raspe (1737–94). According to Walter Blair, it is from these tales that many of America’s tall tales receive their plots, motifs, and techniques (1984:124). The original book was entitled *Baron Munchausen’s Narrative of His Marvellous Travels and Campaigns in Russia*, published in London in 1785. Since its original publication, more than four hundred editions of this text have been produced. The reference to Raspe’s work captures Tartt and Lomax’s white sensibility. They seek to understand the folktales told by Amerson from their points of view as white man and woman, not necessarily Amerson’s as an African American. While his tale may have some elements of the Munchausen tales referred to by Tartt and Lomax, Amerson’s tales are also rooted in African tales.

Tartt's depiction of Rich Amerson again may be seen as a white author using a black character for a white audience's entertainment by employing a stereotypical Sambo character. Joseph Boskin, however, adds a footnote to this reading by asserting that there were in fact two Sambos in American society: one "the white man's conception of the black man as Sambo," and the other "the black man's utilization of Sambo," the latter a "complex role involving a knowing act of pleasing and a manner of manipulating the relationship between him and his adversary" (n.d.:47-49). Amerson relates that his uncle had the biggest teeth he had ever seen. During a storm he told his family, "Don't get skeered. Jes' you an' your mammy an' all de rest crawl in dis here hollow tooth 'til hit blow over. Ain't nothin' goin' hurt you" (Foley 1949:308). Underlying the ridiculous boast of the tale is the story of a black man who cares for his family and protects them against all adversaries, including Mother Nature. The power of the vernacular lures Tartt's white reader into the story of Amerson, but once into the story, the white reader begins the process of unlearning what he has been taught. Tartt's white, female character discovers that this storyteller is a real person just like herself. In assigning Amerson the role of first-person narrator, Tartt demonstrates that the white world may define Amerson's black voice as it likes, but through vehicles such as the folktale, the black voice defines itself.

Tartt's use of the vernacular voice also reaffirms the idea of two worlds coming together for an exchange of ideas. The stories and their language are familiar to the white audience, not merely because of their proximity to the black community, but because of their own use of these same stories and language. While the entire speech pattern may not be entirely similar, words and phrases are borrowed for verbal expression. In the book, *Was Huck Black?: Mark Twain and African-American Voices*, Shelley Fisher Fishkin opened many people's eyes to the importance of cultural exchanges in American literary history and culture. Fishkin notes that we no longer segregate schools or buses, but we still segregate literary history. White writers come from white literary ancestors and black writers from black ones, but this is not accurate (1993:3-15). Tartt's own experiences foster many of the ideas in her stories; however, the folktales and folk songs told to her by the black community serve to inspire Tartt's writing, too.

“A Pair of Blue Stockings” carries the power of speech another step in the relationship between protagonist and audience. This story, the last of the trio of short tales in “Alabama Sketches,” begins “I never was in debt but once in my life” (Foley 1949:312). The introduction to the story by the white female narrator is gone. “A Pair of Blue Stockings” moreover does not use folklore as a mediating tool to speak to its audience. Instead, Josh Horn’s voice alone relates the tale of personal fulfillment in marriage despite financial difficulties. The first-person point of view, as with Amerson’s narrative, becomes a position of power. The narrator Horn relates a year in which he and his wife Alice share a pair of stockings on alternate Sundays because they cannot afford to buy both socks and stockings. Horn continues, “But it’s another time what I’s goin’ tell you ’bout, when I come over to town to have a settlement. An’ paid it out all right; but I didn’t clear but a nickel” (Foley 1949:313). According to Jablon, first-person voice “posits alternative definitions of identity and a recasting of relationships among writer, narrator, and audience” (1997:49). Horn’s direct address to “you” presumes he is speaking to someone. At the end of the story, the audience discovers, the “you” stands for “Miss Ruby” when in conclusion he states, “Yes, Miss Ruby, de Lord been mighty good to me an’ Alice. We both is had a pair of socks an’ stockin’s apiece since dat year” (Foley 1949:315). At this early point in the story, however, the “you” easily appears as a direct address to the audience, without intervention of a narrator. Tartt, in removing the direct presence of the narrator from the beginning of the story, recasts the relationship typically experienced between Horn and the white audience. The white voice, in being absent from the beginning of the story, fosters a direct line of communication between the two communities of the black narrator and white audience. Tartt’s voice is not there to describe Horn or even to cast the shadow of her influence in any way. The white audience must form its own opinions about Horn. They must make value judgments about his character. The narrator’s voice and the narrator’s story exist as his personal testimonial. At least in this world of fiction, the black narrator speaks directly to the white audience, not to them through a white narrator’s retelling of the story.

Besides evoking images of self-sufficiency and independence, Horn’s description of his life with Alice stands in direct contrast to negative images of black family life. In *Women, Culture, and Politics*, Angela Davis writes that

“because the Afro-American family does not reflect the norm, it has been repeatedly defined as pathological in character and has been unjustly blamed for the complex problems that exist in the black community” (1990:75). Josh and Alice Horn relate to one another as equal partners. They work together to make ends meet. When Alice discovers that after paying their “settlement,” or mortgage, they have only a nickel, she states, “Give it to me, an I won’t spend it till you [Josh] say so, and you don’t spend it till I say so” (Foley 1949:313). After putting the nickel away, she offers her husband a solution for getting the supplies they need—the selling of ten chickens. They make sacrifices for one another. Instead of buying socks for himself, Horn buys a pair of blue cotton stockings that can be worn by both him and his wife on Sundays (Foley 1949:314). He explained that Alice belonged to Christian Valley Church, which met on second and fourth Sundays of each month, and his church in town met on first and third Sundays.

Tartt’s initial short stories featured male protagonists, but stories such as “A Pair of Blue Stockings” provided the introduction of female characters she would turn to later.⁷ Through these female protagonists, Tartt helps to unravel the mammy and Jezebel images of black women to discover a womanhood to be admired and valued.⁸ According to bell hooks, images such as these remained after slavery in an effort to maintain the separation of the races and fortify the image of white womanhood as superior. The narrator Horn, in his recollections about Alice, constructs an ideal Southern black woman who is a helpmate, a spiritual leader, a loving mother, and a hard worker. A mother of sixteen, Alice is described as the “brightest Christun I [Josh] ever seed” (Tartt 1949:192). Her husband calls her “trustable,” “never idle,” and “helpful.” According to Horn, “seem lak I ain’t never been ’thout Alice . . . me an’ Alice loved one ernother from the fust” (Tartt 1949:194). They married while still slaves, and had two children before “the s’render.” In hearing Alice’s story through Horn’s memories, Tartt simultaneously reinforces a representation begun in “A Pair of Blue Stockings” of the Horns’ family life that is also positive.

Additionally, by privileging a black narrator’s voice in the Alice story, Tartt provides the reader with a speakerly text which exists to reclaim the voice of the black oral tradition with the inclusion of folksongs, folk stories of the angel of death, and folk rituals. Henry Louis Gates defines a “speakerly text”

as a text whose rhetorical strategy is designed to represent an oral literary tradition meant to emulate the phonetic, grammatical, and lexical patterns of actual speech and thus produce the illusion of oral narration (1988). These stories achieve the most active expression of politically charged language. The story of Alice Horn appeared in a short story bearing her name in the Spring 1949 *Southwest Review*. Tartt reintroduces Josh and Alice Horn at the time of Alice's death.

The time of mourning provides a site at which the black character of Josh Horn and Tartt's white narrator can unite in common sympathy. Jeffrey Steele has written that the "politics of mourning" serves as a theoretical bridge between African-American writing and nineteenth-century white women's writing. According to Steele, mourning extends beyond individual loss to consideration of the cultural conditions (1996:95-98). Steele's reasoning can be extended into the twentieth century and include not only writing but personal interaction. In "Alice," Tartt portrays people crossing the color line during times of mourning to express sympathy to surviving family members. Acts such as the white female narrator and Horn sitting side-by-side in the open hall while Horn "talked of his long and happy life with Alice," and the narrator reaching to shake Horn's hand and being present at the funeral of Alice Horn all symbolically represent a crossing of racial boundaries to share grief. The condition of grief integrates communities that otherwise are segregated.

Tartt's "Earthy Ann" provides the strongest evidence of a writer seeking to analyze and articulate her understanding of the community in which she lives.⁹ Through the characters and images of the story, multiple competing narratives interact with one another. The voice of the white male, though apparent through the imagery of the story, is forced to the background of the text, and the voices of black womanhood and white womanhood step to the foreground and cease to be silent. The reader expects to hear the story of a person named Earthy Ann: she is, after all, the namesake of the story. However, if we understand voice as a means of empowerment, as stated earlier, we must also look to the first-person narrator of the story and examine more closely the story being told. This story excavates and then reappraises experiences within the South, whether those experiences lie in one's cultural heritage, racial identification, religious practice, or class privilege. The white female narrator has set

off for “Tishabee, a small settlement on the Tombigbee River” on the pretext of looking for rare books (Tartt 1944:343). The narrator seeks the home of Charles Darwin Hawkins, described as one of the “local intelligentsia” (Tartt 1944:343). Hawkins is the surviving member of a once well-to-do Southern family. The opening shows the decay of the Old South through the symbolism of a crumbling antebellum home or “big house.” Using her painter’s eye for detail, Tartt records the scene:

The low picket fence was almost completely down. The once-large chimney in the back bedroom had fallen, and part of the roof was open to the sky. Through the gaping doorway and broken windowpanes could be seen a rusty old stove, several plow handles, a grey stone jar, and other useless impedimenta mingled with the dust of the years. There were no steps to the front of the house. Instead, a tangled mass of wisteria vines sprawled along the rotting gallery, and here and there small green lizards darted, their crimson throats inflated in fright like tiny toy balloons (Tartt 1944:343).

In one paragraph, Tartt takes an icon of the genteel South often used by writers and moviemakers to cast a sense of nostalgia and glory of the South’s antebellum slave-holding days, to announce her departure from the traditional narratives surrounding the past. Since there are no steps to the front entrance, an alternate route must be discovered if the narrator wishes to enter the house to discover what lies within its walls.

Tartt’s description provides a stark contrast to that of fellow folklorist Carl Carmer. In his text, he wrote, although “time has been cruel” to some of the “pillared glories with names that are poems,” according to him, “living is still more abundant in the Black Belt than elsewhere in Alabama. Candles in hurricane glasses still gleam on silver goblets” (1934:93).¹⁰ Carmer takes a similar journey to a Greene County house called Rosemount as Tartt’s narrator, but to get to the home he encounters, “you must follow a winding road and cross a winding stream to come to Rosemount. You will see it at last, in a dark circle of trees, with a carved railing set like a crown upon its head” (Carmer 1934:98). Instead of the “useless impedimenta,” Carmer finds a queen with “a

crown upon its head.” Just as a crown symbolizes power for a monarch, the “big house” symbolized power for Carmer, a white male, because the “big house” as the home of the “master” represented a structure of control utilized by the patriarchal system of slavery. After his first sight of “Thorn Hill,” another nearby plantation home, and of a young black servant who announces their arrival, Carmer alters his voice. He adopts the language of a landowner romanticizing about past glory days. He writes, “In those days it was James who brought the news of visitors. Now it is William who lies in wait, and James is a stalwart buck working in the fields and a devil with the girls” (Carmer 1934:93). Carmer declares his identity as part of the master class, by negating the identity of William and James to the position of physical and sexual commodities.

Although later in his book, Carmer expresses his horror of the lynchings told to him by Tartt, he nevertheless finds it necessary to romanticize and sustain the myth of the Old South. In *Getting Beyond Race: The Changing American Culture*, Richard Payne explains, “people are complex and can hold both racist and antiracist views simultaneously; they may discriminate in some situations and strongly oppose discrimination in others” (1998:2). More than ten years after the release of Carmer’s romanticized images, Tartt introduces “life as she finds it” and undermines the authority of such media icons. Scarlet O’Hara’s *Tara*, if you will, stands exposed and “open to the sky” with a “gaping doorway” and “broken windowpanes.” In Tartt’s vision, the wisteria vines provide not the beautiful purple grape-like blooms, but “sprawl and tangle” over the gallery, destroying it. The wisteria, like the Old South and the “Big Houses,” looks pretty on the outside, but hides destructive forces. Surface appearance offers only one part of the story. The relationship of the wisteria and house is further reinforced in a later paragraph: “A door which seemed to have a kinship with the vines that curled around it” (Tartt 1944:343). The door, like the blooms of the vines, blocks one’s view and blinds one to the entire truth of the situation. “While most old houses with their mellow flavor radiate sympathy and understanding, my [the narrator] reaction to this destruction was that of suffocating disgust” (Tartt 1944:345). The narrator is disgusted by the decay of the house. Its presence and the images recorded by her eyes haunt her mind, but until she confronts the contents of the house and then meets Earthy Ann, she does not fully comprehend her disgust. Her whiteness has allowed her only

partial consciousness of the community.

It is important to note that the house still stands, just as the legacy of the South's past still stands and influences the present. A greeting of "hello," as an invitation does not await the narrator; one is not usually welcomed when exposing pieces of a past that are difficult to acknowledge. She must discover the reality of the home for herself, and thus simultaneously acknowledge her role in the tale as white womanhood and recognize her own oppression by the tale of the "Big House." She finds entry into the house through the back door. There she finds an "old Negro man, who very politely . . . invited me to walk in" (Tartt 1944:344). The invitation of the servant affords the narrator the opportunity to see her world from a reverse angle. She has already been disturbed by the presence of the house, but she cannot leave without entering the house. Once she crosses the threshold of the house she leaves the past only to encounter the Old South's legacy to her community. The narrator describes ghosts accompanying her down the hall, but they were not "gentle, unobtrusive and friendly ghosts;" they were "less understanding" (Tartt 1944:345). The narrator experiences the difficulty of revealing the truth of her community's past.

For the narrator to discover the story of Earthy Ann, she must first face the story of the white landowners. When she enters the parlor, she sees "a room which gave subtle insight into glory and decay, a picture which told its own story" (Tartt 1944:344). The narrator, through the icon of the house, draws the reader along parallel dialogues. Stories are being told about the past and present, fiction and reality, and black and white. Before continuing her journey she must battle her "insatiable desire to investigate" or "seek relief from the mustiness of the past" (Tartt 1944:345). Upon staying, she discovers possessions of Derby bisque, Sheffield-plate candlesticks, and hundreds of books including works such as Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, *The Descent of Man* and other books of philosophy. These items represent a past filled with wealth, sophisticated taste, and knowledge. By following the trail of the servant that the narrator has pursued, these same items also represent waste, decadence, and oppression of one race by another. For in these very texts which seek to explain the very origin of man, a race of men discovered ways to use "scientific evidence" to justify both their racism and sexism. Glenna Matthews has argued

that Darwin's theories tended to be reductionist with respect to women, making reproduction the chief criterion for female excellence. In doing this, the role of woman as the protector of religious, moral, and social values is diminished, thus helping to promote the secularization of American society and undermine the religious role in the home (1987:117). Gertrude Himmelfarb argues that Darwin's theory of evolution became attractive to divergent groups of people with differing agendas because it was a scientific theory easily translated into social terms (1968:412). Darwin's theory of evolution poses no problem to Tartt's narrator, but her race's application and selfish interpretation of Darwin's theories disgust her. Himmelfarb explains, "Social Darwinism has been understood in this sense: as a philosophy exalting competition, power, and violence over convention, ethics, and religion. Thus it has become a portmanteau of nationalism, imperialism, militarism, and dictatorship, of the cults of the hero, the superman, and the master race" (1968:426). The social application of Darwin's *Origin of Species* with its "survival of the fittest" ideology provided justification for landowners and nineteenth-century industrialists to justify their mass accumulation of wealth and material possessions at the exploitation of the less educated, the racially oppressed, and the economically deprived. "Social" Darwinism, the application of philosophical and scientific theories to social issues, was by no means the sole originator of such a worldview.¹¹

Rather, what Darwinism did was to ratify pre-existing prejudices and give them greater validity by linking female inferiority to a specific evolutionary argument about the virtue of male struggle. In this regard, there were parallel developments in racial thought. Racism certainly existed before the *Origin*. But after its publication, the "potentialities of Darwin as a rationale for American racist attitudes" were soon apparent. Before long, evolution or the survival of the fittest were being routinely evoked to justify a variety of racist attitudes and policies (Matthews 1987: 123).

All of these posturings served to foster the idea of blacks and females as inferior beings. Also, these beliefs allowed those same supporters of slavery and later industrialists to espouse ideas of paternalism in which from their superior position they must take care of those who "served" and "wedded" them. The naming of Darwin's text within Tartt's story is not a criticism of Darwin's theories themselves, rather recognition of the manipulation of the theories to subjugate

others to one's will. Additionally, the presence of text brings a contemporary debate within the boundaries of the text. In *The Retreat of Scientific Racism*, Elazar Barkan perceives the decades between the World Wars as a period in which the debate of the legitimacy of certain racial ideologies failed under the scrutiny of growing anthropological and sociological study. The massive poverty of the Great Depression "made it painfully real that destitution was not caused by a biological flaw" (1992:344). Additionally, changes in society following both the Great Depression and World War II saw "inferior" groups playing more significant roles and asserting their political interests (Barkan 1992:342-344). These groups became more vocal in the refutation of their "inferior" status.

Tartt, through her short stories, symbolizes this transition of American thought by setting Darwin's text within the ruins of a former grand drawing room. The ideologies, like the room and house, represent the past. The narrator's disgust acknowledges that though the book and house may be a part of bygone eras, the ideas they represent are not completely dead. The narrator knows the stories associated with these relics; they comprise part of her own identity as a Southern white woman. Minrose C. Gwin would tell us that the narrator's "disgust" comes from an encounter with herself as an object in a black woman's text. Gwin states, "I must be able to read my white womanhood as a sign of everything I abhor" (1988:23). Such a reading, however, narrows the narrator's reaction to that of race. As stated earlier, Tartt's use of the "big house" offers multiple simultaneous dialogues that guide the reader to fuller perspective of the relationships, past and present, in the community. Though she is discussing the texts of black women authors, Barbara T. Christian in her response to Gwin's "A Theory of Black Women's Texts and White Women's Readings, or The Necessity of Being Other" reasons:

I would hope that white women are reading . . . not as "white other," (which is an alienating, ever abstract term), but as white women, which is after all, who they are . . . In actively choosing to look at the universe, and really know it, they may need to know our point of view and perhaps see themselves that they had not before, thus refining their definition of that concept, woman (1988:35-36).

A white woman has penned the literal text of the story, but the text being read by the narrator is the text of the “big house,” which is not limited to one racial or gendered viewpoint.

After reading the “big house,” the narrator gains a better ability to read the story of Earthy Ann whom she encounters after seeing the “rare” books she came to see. Characterizing Earthy Ann’s voice as one she would never forget, the narrator describes the voice “as being so lifeless and flat that one might walk on it” (Tartt 1944:345). Of course, Earthy Ann had been walked on. Kept separated from the black community because “Mr. Charlie say ’ligion was jes’ a pack of foolishness,” Earthy Ann admits to the narrator that she feels her “time is mos’ out” and she thinks that if she had “’ligion” the hopelessness and loneliness that she feels might be easier (Tartt 1944:348).¹² Her lack of religion keeps her from fully participating in the social aspects of the black community in Sumter County. On the day of the narrator’s visit there is to be a barbecue supper at New Hope. A young woman reminds Earthy Ann of the supper in front of the narrator: “If she had heard the door of destiny slam shut in her face at that moment she could not have looked more wretched” (Tartt 1944:348). Earthy Ann’s mother told her to live for Christ, but Marse Bob and his son Mr. Charlie told her religion was trash and “dey got book larnin’” (Tartt 1944:349).

The books take on more significance to Earthy Ann because she is unable to read them. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., notes that literacy has been the visible sign of reason at least since the Renaissance in Europe (1988:57). From this, a direct correlation between political rights and literacy develops. By making it illegal to teach slaves to read, slaveowners assured the race’s enslavement. Illiteracy became equated with inferior intellect. Gates quotes nineteenth-century author William Gilmore Simms as stating, “if you establish that the Negro intellect is equal to the white race you take away the best argument for keeping him in subjection, and the possibility of doing so” (1988:58). By forcing illiteracy upon Earthy Ann, the Mr. Charlies of the world forced her dependence on them. Earthy Ann looked to these white men for guidance; they looked on her as an object to cook, clean, and serve. She doubted her mother’s advice because she was uneducated; now, however, she doubts her own doubts. Her illiteracy

denies her the ability to judge for herself. The judgments she has made have been based on hearsay. Earthy Ann's identity has been lost; instead, identified "with the two races whose blood she shares in that peculiar relation which one sees so often in the South, [she] is cut off from the life of one, living in the midst of another which uses her (there can be no doubt of that) but does not take her in" (Tartt 1944:349). Unable to reconcile the various discourses in her life, Earthy Ann's own identity of self evaporates. Earthy Ann is another casualty of the "big house" narrative.

In "Earthy Ann," all aspects of the "normal narrative" of the South are present. The Big House, the black servants, and the ghosts of the former white landowners are all accounted for. Tartt merely reorders them by taking us through the back door of the "Big House." The audience expects to hear the story of the Big House and they do. But this time they hear the story through the house and the servant. The master's voice remains silent. The voice that speaks to us is that of his servant, Earthy Ann. Her speech subverts the traditional hierarchies of power. Tartt's narrator reclaims Earthy Ann from the past and in doing so also accepts responsibility for the deeds of her forefathers. The house, Tartt's narrator tells the reader, sits as "an accusing monument to past mistakes and the utter futility of possession" (Tartt 1944:348). Though the narrator, as she climbs into her buggy, feels that "nothing is ever finished or left behind forever," she begins the reconciliation process. In reclaiming Earthy Ann's story, the narrator brings Earthy Ann inside the conversation that until now has occurred around her but never acknowledged her presence.

Through Tartt's writing of short stories, she preserves the portraits of men like Rich Amerson and Josh Horn and women like Alice Horn and Hester Frye. She does not write from a desire to directly challenge and destroy the stories that circulate in her white community, but she writes to confront myths and talk to other texts that she knows exist but she hasn't been able to fully hear. The introduction to *Mid-Country*, which contains the story "Earthy Ann," declares that "all literature, begins at the folk level with people talking" and "the second stage . . . begins when personal experience and folksay give way to interpretation and local color, and a writer writes out of love or hatred of the region as well as knowledge of it" (Wimberly 1945:xiii). Tartt's inability to leave forever her hometown, despite her need to escape to New Orleans or New

York occasionally, offers evidence to the love she had for her community—the love she had for the people. Critical debate within the circles of feminist and African-American literary theory expresses the difficulty one has in trying to achieve openness and freedom from prejudices, for all must begin our own forms of inquiry from our own particularity. Tartt is no exception to this fact. Through her writing of short stories, she achieves nonetheless a growing integration of diverse perspectives, thus preparing the way for social action. Her writing reminds us that before society can change, it must recognize the need for change. If this is to happen, the South and its past must be de-romanticized. The insight of her narrators and the voices of the black community offer the reader moments of epiphany in which to recognize this need. Just because nothing is left behind, the possibility of change does not end. Where Darwin's theories had been used as a tool of oppression, his theories hold out the idea of evolution to a better human species. ■

Notes

¹ Reflections by Tartt on her folk song and folk story collecting and her writing can be found in the personal collection of Billie Stuart, Livingston native. Also some of this material is duplicated in the Ruby Pickens Tartt Collection at the Julia Tutwiler Library at the University of West Alabama. Material used from this collection is referred to as the Tartt Collection throughout this article. Other collections cited are the VPB collection (private papers of Virginia Pounds Brown, collected during her research for *Toting the Lead Row: Ruby Pickens Tartt, Alabama Folklorist*, 1981), and the Lomax Collection (James Avery Lomax Papers, University of Texas at Austin).

² This understanding of Tartt's writing was not only formed through Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), but it was also developed through the work of Elizabeth Abel, Barbara Christian and Helene Moglen in their introduction to *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). In the Introduction, "The Dream of a Common Language" they summarized their experiences in directing a conference entitled "Psychoanalysis in African American Contexts: Feminist Reconfigurations" in which they hoped to reconcile white feminists' needs to use psychoanalysis in reading African-American texts and black scholars' need to present alternate critical approaches to texts (1–18).

³ Part of Virginia Pounds Brown's unpublished manuscript of the correspondence between Ruby Pickens Tartt and the Lomax family. No story about Dock Reed was ever written by Tartt. Stories of him continuously populate the correspondence

between the Tartt and the Lomaxes. One can only assume that Tartt truly felt she could not capture in words her friend Dock Reed. Kathryn Tucker Windham wrote about the friendship between Reed and Tartt in *Alabama: One Big Front Porch* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1975, 56–58).

⁴ Martha Foley and her editorial board at Houghton-Mifflin selected “Alabama Sketches” for the anthology *Best Short Stories of 1945*. “Alabama Sketches” also appeared in *U.S. Stories: Regional Stories from the Forty-Eight States* (New York: Hendricks House-Farrar Straus, 1949, 307–315). The other two tales included in the three-part story are “Richard, the Tall-Hearted” and “Bing Oliver Is a Pushing Man.” “Richard, the Tall-Hearted” features Rich Amerson telling folktales. Some of the same material from this text appears in Harold Courlander’s *The Big Old World of Richard Creeks*, published in 1962. Courlander was introduced to Amerson during his 1950 recording trip to Sumter County when he worked with Tartt to gather material for *Negro Folk Music of Alabama* (1951, Folkways Records). “Bing Oliver Is a Pushing Man” was also published in *Son of a Gun Stew: A Sampling of the Southwest* (Editor Elizabeth Matchett Stover, Dallas: University Press, 1945, 21–28.) A similar folk story-based tale collected by Tartt was published in abbreviated form under the title of “Guinea Jim” in B. A. Botkin’s *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1945, 180–182) and *A Treasury of Southern Folklore* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1949, 594–596). In this tale, Josh Horn tells the story of Guinea Jim, a runaway slave.

⁵ Susan Snider Lanser calls such a narrator “heterodiegetic.” She uses this term to describe narrators who are not part of the story they narrate. “Homodiegetic narrator” refers to a narrator who is a character in the fictional world he/she portrays (*The Narrative Act: Point of View in Prose Fiction*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981, 37). She attributes the terms to Gerard Genette.

⁶ References to selections from “Alabama Sketches” will be taken from *U.S. Stories: Regional Stories from the Forty-Eight States* unless otherwise noted. (1949:307-315).

⁷ Short stories by Tartt that feature female protagonists include “Alice” (*Southwest Review* Spring 1949, 192–195), “Carrie Dykes” (From *Hell to Breakfast*. Editors Moody C. Boatwright and Donald Day. Dallas: SMU Press, 1944, 21–28), and “Earthy Ann” (*Southwest Review*. Spring 1944: 397–405 and in *Mid-Country: Writings from the Heart of America*, Editor Lowry C. Wimberly, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1945, 343–350).

⁸ For a more complete discussion of bell hooks’s arguments concerning the political and social status of black women, see *Ain’t I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. In chapter two, “Continued Devaluation of Black Womanhood,” she examines the idea of black woman as either a sexless mammy figure or a sexually loose woman (Boston: South End Press, 1981). Another text bearing a similar title of *Ar’n’t I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1985) by Deborah Gray White dedicates the entire first chapter to the mythology surrounding the naming of female slaves either “mammies” or “Jezebels” and opens

discussion on the effects of these two images on black womanhood.

- ⁹ “Earthy Ann” appeared in the anthology *Mid-Country: Writings from the Heart of America*, edited by Lowry C. Wimberly (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1945, 343–350). It was originally written under the title of Hester Frye, the woman Tarrt originally interviewed.
- ¹⁰ These passages appear in *Stars Fell on Alabama*. The edition used in this study was published by the University of Alabama Press in 2000.
- ¹¹ For a more thorough examination of influence of Darwinism on American ideologies, see Richard Hofstadter’s *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, 2nd ed. rev. (Boston: Beacon, 1955).
- ¹² Mr. Charlie’s ideas on religion represent the growing desecularization of American society mentioned earlier in relation to the introduction of Darwin’s *Origin of Species*. See Glenna Matthews, “Just A Housewife:” *The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

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Going to the Boomalatta¹: Narrating Black Mardi Gras in Mobile, Alabama

Kern Jackson

Zora Neale Hurston articulated in *Dust Tracks on a Road* that “research is formalized curiosity, it is poking and prying with a purpose.”² Collecting personal narratives about Mardi Gras in Mobile is a good illustration of Hurston’s point. Learning how Mobilians have gone about making Mardi Gras “just work out,” over a hundred-year period, opens the way to a better understanding of the ethos or guiding beliefs behind this central event in their community. Descriptions of how “things just worked out” provide opportunities for understanding how traditional black neighborhoods in Mobile addressed profound sociocultural challenges pertaining to race, class, gender, and migratory issues. To view this tradition closely is a further opportunity to appreciate how insider-knowledge ethnography can provide a glimpse into collective memory. Through the example of Mardi Gras in Mobile, we can further understand how neighborhoods are rooted in the complexities of participants’ private lives and experiences.

In the ritual play of Carnival, as part of and in support of the fabrication and execution of the dream that Samuel Kinser, in *Carnival American style: Mardi Gras at New Orleans and Mobile*, calls “mirthful indolence,”³ it is important to understand one’s role both historically and in the moment. This means recognizing that while participants pursue leisure in one role, in another they bodily become expressions of varying degrees of labor 365 days of the year. The underlying purpose—not unlike the ideal of the Video Oral History Project of the City of Mobile’s Tri-centennial celebration committee narratives⁴—is to achieve what Alice Walker describes as “an unself-conscious sense of collective oneness, that naturalness, that (even when anguished) grace.”⁵ Whether or not

this goal is achieved, the point is to be inspired towards survival and making things “just work out.”

Mardi Gras in Mobile can best be distilled as an event by contextualizing the other 364 days leading up to and winding down from Fat Tuesday. My view of the festival is somewhat different from other seasoned researchers of Gulf Coast Mardi Gras, because I choose to view the festival from the perspective of informants who live in traditional black neighborhoods in Mobile. To be sure black Mardi Gras in Mobile was born of Jim Crow segregation, of the legacy of being unwelcome to participate openly in the collective Mobile Mardi Gras dream world of fun and gaiety that is in large part dominated by the white elite. But my interest is in the representative narrative examples of black folks' participation in Carnival in and beyond the boundaries of traditional black neighborhoods—neighborhoods in a city that purports to be progressive and to have made positive political, economic, and racial changes in recent decades. Kinser points out that Carnival in Mobile “conserves the black-white barriers which can be observed nearly everywhere in American society and which developed with force in the slave society of this southern area's first century and a half of existence.”⁶ The views of elite white Mobilians have been competently researched most notably by Julian Rayford in *Chasin' the Devil Round a Stump* and by Louis de Vendel Chaudron in *Mobile Mystics and the Story of Mardi Gras Societies*.⁷ Also, it would be too simplistic to equate black Mardi Gras participation and performance with some sort of victim status. Mardi Gras for black Mobilians is an opportunity to recognize and enhance their own humanity. To be able to access this cultural fabric through the experiences of representative community members is valuable. In addition, part of what framed the discussion of Mardi Gras among informants and neighbors was how they viewed their participation as focal points of objectification, the lens through which others view them as objects rather than people. This was part of the reason why many informants said they did not participate in Mardi Gras at all.

Part of the historical participation by black Mobilians and neighbors has been to take advantage of Carnival's “qualities of inversion, of ambivalence, of conspicuous consumption and excess hav[ing] to do with removal and escape from social calculations” (Kinser, xv). Blacks have done this through their roles



FIGURE 1

Clifford A. Thomas, “drum major” for the Bay City Brass Band of Mobile, Alabama, strutting during the 2003 Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue Children’s Day Parade, held annually the Monday before Fat Tuesday.

as participant performers, with a conscious understanding of racial oppression, segregation, and the legacy of the effect of Jim Crow. For these informants, understanding the process of being objectified is not unlike moments in slave narratives where people began to understand their value in terms of money. Fredrick Douglass who, for example, initially began to determine his own self-worth and therefore walk as a true subject in the world when he realized the price of enslaved labor as well as the worth of getting paid. In the case of Mardi Gras, however, the currency is the knowledge of one’s role in ritualistic play.

Historically, for many of the Creole and colored peoples in the traditional black neighborhoods, being a “true subject” in the world in many respects hinged on this realization of being objectified, and on incorporating or acting upon this knowledge. Josephine Baker, the great international performer in the “Negro Revues” of the early twentieth century, as an example, took Douglass’s realization a step further in actual performance. Audiences knew as part of her style of performance that she knew that they were gazing at her

in specific eroticized ways. Baker used aspects of her performance to alter the gaze to focus upon herself, thus manipulating the mechanics or dynamics of being objectified. During Mardi Gras, the process is moving from being aware of oneself as racialized and eroticized object to controlling and manipulating that objectification to be more of your true subject self, albeit walking in a collective dream world. It is vital to understand this dynamic, for Baker's purpose wasn't about showing white people that one knows what they are thinking. Nor is that the case for black participants in Mardi Gras. It is about reclaiming "myself for myself" on an experiential level as a true subject even in a world where one occupies unique spaces of spectacle. So the performative nature includes engaging the process of constructing one's self as an object in order to understand what goes into the machinery of objectification, to see how to make situations "just work out." Dominant society patterns of objectifying black folks or other subordinate peoples is countered by, to borrow a phrase from minstrel performers of various eras, "niggering it up a lil' bit," or, as explained by Albert Murray, being able to "play" with the possibilities while "confronting, acknowledging, and contending with the infernal absurdities and ever-impending frustrations inherent in the nature of all existence." ⁸

Understanding being objectified includes, but is not limited to, being aware of how one's labor is exploited and how one's sexuality is eroticized. A consequence is that "man the player becomes man the stylizer and by the same token the humanizer of chaos; and thus does play become ritual, ceremony, and art" (Murray, 89-90). This is the case with parading brass bands and masking figures known as "mollies." Brass band members and mollies represent the ideal of how to make things "just work out" in ways that are at once emancipatory, revolutionary, and resistive to oppression.

"It's your last chance to dance!"

There is much more to the function of brass bands than their performing along parade routes on Fat Tuesday. Brass bands occupy a unique space of spectacle during Mardi Gras and they get paid which contributes to their survival while pursuing their own pleasure. The Excelsior Band, founded in 1883, is perhaps the most identifiable. In 1994 Robert Petty, then director of the brass band, indicated that part of the band's function was getting the

parade audience to move and initiating a response:

When we are in the Mardi Gras parade, when we come along the street, we have people that follow just to listen to us. That second line, I know that you heard that before, that second line? When we come along the street, the band is so old that the type of music we play the older people enjoy. . . . When we come along the street everybody enjoys it. They enjoy it tremendously.⁹

Getting audiences “to move” leads to the band members achieving reputations. Parades are very public, racialized settings where the band secures its reputation. They accomplish this through the very same dynamic and attitude used in the way that they perform:

And then if they are standing back you see them close in. They get close to you and just want to come out and be with you. If it was not for the police down there, there would be a whole group of people following right along with us. Just to hear us (Petty, 11).

The members of the Excelsior band acknowledge and contend with the absurdity of being objectified. They recognize that their performances are valued differently by different cultural groups and audiences. They parade, in part, to take advantage of other performing possibilities in non-parading venues that they do not normally have privilege or access to. Specific examples are events organized by the white Mardi Gras Association:

The Queen might have a party at her house . . . [we would] go out there and play at her house. I’ve gotten drunk on a many a night playing at parties and places like when we play weddings and parties that they have (Petty, 14).

The members of the Excelsior Brass Band are self-consciously aware in every interchange of who they are, what is expected of them, and how to negotiate back and forth. This is evidenced in the style of play as Mr. Petty proudly boasted of the band’s ability to play requests along parts of the parade route



FIGURE 2

James "Noon" Matthews, bass drummer for the the Excelsior Brass Band. This photo was taken at the Knights of Peter Claver Hall where Mr. Matthews stopped for a cup of gumbo prior to marching in the last parade on Fat Tuesday 2004.

heavily occupied by white citizens such as at the reviewing stand. He and the band know that the gigs, including other parades, booked during the carnival season correspond directly to the number of future engagements:

When we play for the whites the music we play, like I say, we play “Stars Fell on Alabama” or a waltz, tunes like that. See, that is what white people like. We very rarely play for blacks, that is the whole thing about it. Most of our small group music we play, most of our gigs are played for white people (Petty, 13).

Here aesthetics and improvisatory nature of performance reflects self-conscious comportment as the other, the familiar object altering the gaze, focusing upon themselves.

With respect to sexual eroticization, a bandmate, a drummer, chimed in during the interview, “really, we have had ladies wants to pull you out of line” (Petty, 6). Indeed, there are very few places in Mobile where one has to worry about white women “hanging all over arm[s]” or anything else (Petty, 6). But by the same token the band members manipulate the machinery of objectification encouraging and negotiating the limits of what their white audiences want.

That is why . . . because they will call up, they will call me at my house and ask me, “get me five members out of the Excelsior Band, I’m going to have a party here, I’ve heard you people and I know what you can play, that is what I want to hear.” That is what they call and ask me for (Petty, 14).

The caller could have gone through the union, but the social boundary was crossed by calling Mr. Petty at home. This is one of those moments of absurdity and familiarity where he and the band are being objectified. Operating on multiple levels the functions of the brass band are more than their literal performance during parades. Members are a type of masked figure mediating and controlling the creative expressions of their labor. They “play” with the possibilities no matter the situation. The appropriate response, in relation to the process of constructing one’s self as an object, is to be cool and graceful.

"I'm glad you like the way we people play, I hope you'll see fit to call us again," is perhaps a way of bringing humanity to chaos.

"Mollie, Mollie, catch your tail! Mollie, Mollie catch your tail!"

In contrast to the brass band members who are "masked" figures that perform in large part for the gaze of the elite white majority during Mardi Gras, mollies exist and primarily function within the context of the traditional black neighborhoods. "Mollies" are members of neighborhoods who dress up and mask on Mardi Gras morning, unofficially parading throughout the day. Their function, essentially, was to bring attention through humor, parody, or sarcasm to instances where members or the whole community weren't contributing to "just making things work out." They maximized the principles of excess, reversal, repetition, juxtaposition, and condensation. They are masking figures behind the masking figures that are subject to the gaze of the oppressor. Mollies are a trickster character but in the vernacular of black Mobilians the subtle nuance is tailored to their traditional places and spaces.

Mollies cover contextual ground for participants in Mardi Gras. They were known to participate in parades as well as roaming the neighborhoods. In addition, individual black Mardi Gras performers in non-segregated public space are "maskers," literally those wearing masks while riding on floats going down Government Street, or those public officials who are deemed spokespersons for the black community. Maskers can further be understood to be like the brass band members who simultaneously get paid for their performances while undercutting their objectification as exploited laborers. They do this by bringing humanity to certain parts of perceived chaos and through the application of style to their performances.

Mollies are, to borrow a folkloric phrase, like "bunnies in a briar patch." The briar patches in this case are the traditional black neighborhoods that historically have been fairly insulated from dominant culture coming in and having its way. The briar patch in folktale is where the bunny, representing the enslaved or newly freed, would go to escape the control of the enslaver or vehicle of Jim Crow custom and law. Mollies occupied this place and space, even when they appeared outside the context of their neighborhoods, down by the wharf, at the turn of the century, when public masking in non-float riding



FIGURE 3

An artist paints a float commemorating “mollies” that roved the avenue during Colored Carnival. Note the exaggerated breasts, behind and mouth of what was, more than likely, a man dressed as a woman. This photograph was taken at the Mobile Area Mardi Gras Association’s W. L. Russell Mardi Den, named for the association’s first president. Note the bicycle rear tire. During the early parades in the 1930s and ’40s, performers often walked or rode on bicycles or flatbed trucks. (Photo by Anne Kimzey)

context was still legal, and the last third of the twentieth century, when mollies, fully disguising their true identity, would step in and out of the parades put on by Colored Carnival, and later the Mobile Area Mardi Gras Association (MAMGA).

When asked if anyone in her family dressed up for Carnival Tuesday, Addie Taylor Reed of the Campground neighborhood said:

My mother would dress the smaller children in clown outfits and make

up their faces. But see they did that because they could bundle 'em real good in the wintertime, see. And they put all this on and they wouldn't have to worry about them getting cold. She would line the outfits, so it'll be make 'em warm, uh, huh. I remember Adolph and Charles, Boots and Dot, mother would. . . . But the older children, she never did do that, but the younger ones she did.¹⁰

Wearing costumes as children is different than masking as adults. Edley Hubbard of Plateau/Magazine Point suggests that masking is a fading tradition: "the one thing that is missing is neighborhood masking. People in the various neighborhoods around Mobile would do street masking."¹¹ Describing some masking figures identified in Plateau/Magazine Point, Hubbard calls the names of specific masking figures that wear costumes that appear to him to be "feminish":

They call 'em now transvestite something like that. Well, they didn't use that name during that. It was just somebody putting on feminine clothes. One of the men named Gina Dexter, and the other . . . I believe he was a Simpson, but we called him Beady, but they looked nice, and you couldn't tell who they were if you didn't know who they were. That's just one of their doings (Hubbard, 14).

Myrtle Fisher Martin from off Davis Avenue alluded to this function of mollies describing how on Mardi Gras day as a child, you would want to get up early in the morning because:

The mollies would be coming down the Avenue, which when I'm saying mollies, people would dress up any kind of way that they wanted, the men they would have on women looking clothes, the women might have on a men clothes or; you couldn't tell them who they were, unless you really knew them.¹²

Both Hubbard and Martin stress in their narratives the uncertainty of "really knowing" who the mollies in their neighborhood are. In a lecture entitled

“African Art & Black American Aesthetics,” Joseph A. Brown explained to an audience at the Montgomery Museum of Art that:

How do you take chaos and show that you are strong enough to contain what W. E. B. DuBois said, “That we live behind the veil,” the veil of racism and oppression, the veil of invisibility and not knowing who we are, we look at the world beyond the veil. And he talks about that double consciousness, that two-ness at war. He talks about if you are going to be Black and self-conscious, you’ve got to somehow marshal your genius and keep opposing forces in harmony and— But he didn’t say go carve a mask. He said, “be art in the African tradition.” And how do we say that? After the Egyptian, and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of the seventh son, born with a veil and gifted with second sight in this American world; a world which yields him no true self-consciousness but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. He said, “no, Negro, no Black person, male or female can ever look at himself and herself and see the true sight. The only thing he can do is look at himself through the eyes of somebody looking at him.” And so I go to look at your face and whatever your face tells me about me, that’s who I am. If I even see you looking at me.¹³

There is a DuBoisian twoness Martin and Hubbard experience in that it can be interpreted as an ambivalence to determine whether to accept the full realities the mollies represent. For Martin, mollies were fully engaged in the process of constructing one’s self as an object. The point is that the children are focusing on the mollies. Mollies demonstrate to them that you have to be art.

They would be all different kind of disguises and things, and they would be walking down the Avenue, they might have their face all made up and big dresses with the hair all . . . , coming all backed up. And we be just going down the street, and we be saying, “Mollie, Mollie, catch your tail? Mollie, Mollie catch your tail?” And they would look at you like they could run at you, you know, they be, you be meddling them,



FIGURE 4

The 2004 King Elexis, standing outside the W. L. Russell Den.

they was going to be coming like they going to come back at you, but it was just in all in fun, they wasn't doing nothing because, "Mollie, Mollie catch your tail." Like you was going to be running behind them, but then they turn back to run on you, which quite naturally you going to run. And see there 'bout we living on the Avenue, you could see them early in the morning. They would get up early in the morning and be going, just walking around. And then this fellow named May, he start having his parade early at ten o'clock in the morning on Mardi Gras day (Martin, 20-21).

Described here is the performance of ritualistic intent to elicit warning. The encounter Martin has with mollies not only calls attention to the language of the symbolic message, but also emphasizes the use of bodily movement. Mollies may seem "eccentric" to an informant who is remembering childhood encounters with these significant figures, but their inspired behavior among



FIGURE 5

The MAMGA emblem float in 1993 when the parade still lined up along St. Anthony Street. (Photo by Anne Kimzey)

children is instructive about the way one will need to comport themselves outside the context of the Avenue or other traditional black neighborhoods. That repetition of the saying “Mollie, Mollie, catch your tail? Mollie, Mollie catch your tail?” reinforces to the children of black Mardi Gras early on carnival morning, that the world, indeed for a day, will be changed into a space for ritualistic play that they better walk in with some trepidation. It is instructive, explaining how to take on and how to wear behavioral masks in mollie-like ways in a carnivalesque world that exists outside the traditional black neighborhood the other 364 days of the year. The mollie therefore manifests itself as an object of formalized ritual¹⁴ representing perhaps the overall function of Colored Carnival or Mardi Gras. Place and space encourage and provide opportunity for people to behave like mollies dancing down the middle of the street and alternately scaring and entertaining children and neighbors from various neighborhoods.

Both Hubbard and Martin also mention a man named May who they

believe established an early formal neighborhood parade prior to the formation of the Colored Carnival Association in 1940. Annie Louise Kersh had wonderful detailed memories of Mardi Gras and explained that:

Some people would have cars and blow horns and . . . Mr. May, he had the first parade that we had, August May. And he had something, it was called a parade and they had floats and stuff. From them on, everybody sort of said, that was a pretty good idea, and they sort of hitched into that and started to doing things . . . well, they begin to elaborate on that. 'Cause it grew from that.¹⁵

May's parades, not unlike the Zulu parade in New Orleans,¹⁶ involved participants who wore thematic costumes that alluded to or connected to African design. As Brown explained, to allude to African design within the context of African-American cultural performance is not a process of looking for equivalencies. He talks about being black and self-conscious in terms that allow you to marshal your genius and keep opposing forces in harmony and balance (Brown, 4). To be a mollie is to be art in the African tradition. Mollies have been misrepresented as uncontrolled or eccentric. But what they do is restore balance to the community. They are a distorted reflection of other participants in black Mardi Gras. They show what is wrong by holding up a mirror to your disorder (Brown, 4). Not unlike the festival event as a whole, mollies restore balance to counteract oppression in situations of imposed chaos enforced to keep people less than human. The mollies sing and dance and "make all the manner of joyful noises" (Brown, 4). It is a mistake to suppose them happy because of the pleasure that they bring to their audience. At the core of their performances are the underlying sociocultural challenges that black Mobilians continually face. Individual and community identities are affected by how the mollies' performances nudge themselves and other participants back into a state of humanity. This is what May capitalized on, taking advantage of the presence of a larger number of ritualistic role players in a more densely populated traditional black neighborhood off the Avenue. [The "Avenue" referred to throughout is the former Davis Avenue, which has been renamed Martin Luther King, Jr., Avenue. It is an important thoroughfare

in the African-American community in Mobile.]

Fred Richardson's first experience with Mardi Gras and confronting mollies left him in "utter disbelief"; he just couldn't initially believe what he saw, which left him in awe. A mollie, according to Richardson, "is a person who is not officially a part of the parade but was being set on taking the attention from the official Mardi Gras parade."¹⁷ He witnessed a mollie that dressed as a pregnant woman but the stomach was three feet out in front, it "would be so gross, it was just . . . and they would be dancing right along with everybody else" (Richardson, 13). More importantly, Richardson explained that they did refocus everyone's gaze:

They would almost take the show. You would see five, six or seven of them and when they came down the street people forgot everybody else and focused on them. They were just . . . I think in New Orleans they have that kind of stuff. We don't have much of that any more. But oh, we had plenty mollies out there and they were very unofficial and wasn't anything anybody could do because the public liked them and if they messed with them, the public wouldn't like it so they were just jumping to the procession and they were just . . . and most of 'em could dance and they would . . . it was really something to see (Richardson, 14).

This speaks to the tradition of the mollies' key role in ritualistic play. Their central function is recognized and sanctioned by other participants. They may not be official but they historically have been focal points and their style and performance according to Richardson is a sanctioned opportunity within the community to use mollies to focus on themselves and their own participation.

Whereas Richardson was intrigued by mollies, Annie Kersh explained in incredible detail why she was afraid of them.

Frankly, I might not know exactly what they are but I can tell you what they do and what they did and how afraid of them I was. They were people who, to me they were imitators of something that they had wanted to do a long time, and then this is a good chance and nobody

to know who I am. My mother had, and my grandmother had a friend who lived right there and we called her "Nanny." And she always made us a cake for Mardi Gras. And I was going to get the cake early that morning because we were going to see the mollies on the Avenue. Most of 'em were men. Not many of 'em were ladies. And they would have on these short skirts, beautiful dresses, and wild faces. And you really couldn't see who it was. And this guy was behind me; I could see him. And he was going to let her see his costume; I didn't know that. I went up in her house and he came down and I bammed on the door and locked it 'cause he [was] on the porch. I said . . . and I don't, I didn't know him, I said, "and Nanny I didn't let him in." So she went to the door and she started laughing, and she said his name, but I didn't know the man. I didn't know. She said, "He not going bother you." But it was something about their faces; the costumes was pretty but if you ever seen a screened-wire face and then there's another face under it. They had two sets of eyes and it just . . . they just looked like they were unreal. And they walked all evening up and down Live Oak and on Martin Luther King, well it was on Davis Avenue then. And they would parade. They had, they could mask until 7 o'clock. And they had on full dresses or they had on these ruffled skirts; they were pretty things. And they looked nice. And anybody who wanted to could mask. And a lot of 'em had on clown suits but wasn't too many wore clown suits. They liked a bonnet thing for their head and these mask faces and a silk hat sometime to go with that mask face so it'd be close to 'em and you could see their hair or whatever they had on (Kersh, 15-16).

Kersh's fear was caused in large part by the distorted face of the mollie that knew her grandmother's friend. But even in her fear Kersh describes the symmetry of the art of this mollie, the way that he took dispersed elements, shapes, and materials and made them hold together. The difference in her childlike response and Nanny's knowing response also indicate the dynamic of the mollies' role in restoring balance.

Mabel Dennison, on the other hand, a descendent of a *Clotilde* African,¹⁸ discusses actual danger mollies perpetrated on her older sister. Evidently her



FIGURE 6

A member of the Mardi Gras Krewe “All in the Family” (right) poses next to the rented float that he will ride with a friend from another krewe during the parade Fat Tuesday 2004. Some floats for the MAMGA parade are rented from other parading organizations.

sister liked to follow the Excelsior Band as far as it would go as part of the second line, “just walking, they danced in the street or whatever or however they felt like doing.”¹⁹ In her narrative a discussion of her sister being afraid of attending the parades was preceded by a description of maskers walking in groups.

You see the people, more people used to mask and walk the sidewalks in a mask, you know, especially on Mardi Gras Day. [. . .] But I had a sister who said one time that one thing that stopped her from going to the parade, say back about 1950 something, 1950, 1940, 1950 something. She said, you know they used to throw confetti, and confetti cost money, so when people gave out of buying confetti, they would

scoop, oh it was gobs of it, all in the curb, they would pick it up out of the curb and wait till there was somebody with their mouth open and grinning at something you know, and throw it in, throw it in their mouth, throw it in their face. [. . .] So she said she better stop going to parades, cause she wouldn't be able to take that, so she stopped going altogether to parades. But now my father still continued to go. It could be raining. It could be cold, but my dad would go to the parade. But I had to stay home; I couldn't go those nights. But he would take me, cause he loved the parade. And then, uh, it wasn't as dangerous as it got to be. You know people playing so many tricks and people playing so many things in later years, Like I said, they'd pick up the confetti and throw it. They thought that was fun, but see that's dangerous (Dennison, 33).

In this narrative excerpt Dennison demonstrates that mollies can threaten and frighten the beholder. For her sister there was no mediator as was the case with Annie Kersh having her grandmother's friend there to give context to and help her to deal with her perceived danger and to process her fear so that the mollie presence and performance on that porch was understood to have some utility.

In the data collection process for this project it was difficult to identify and locate someone who actually referred to themselves as a mollie. About the closest was a man named Nelson Curtis, Jr. He lived in various neighborhoods in and around Mobile, from Lincoln Village out on Highway 45 in Prichard to Cotton Street in Crichton Station. With the street name of "Runt," Curtis was a familiar figure on the Avenue where during the course of his life he did everything from shining shoes, to delivering newspapers, to working on the docks and gambling in the clubs and pool halls, to being a self-described "zoot-suit-wearing, jitterbugging, kept man and dandy." With respect to Mardi Gras, he extended the discussion of the danger faced in the presence of mollies. Also, commenting on the role of confetti throwing, he contributed more detail about the danger of this almost from the perspective that he had actually done this himself.

Yes and they had cut-up paper called confetti and a person say how you feel when you open your mouth, he'll throw it in your mouth, nothing but paper. They had to cut that out because people put glass in it and when they 'threwed' in your mouth, you would get glass. They don't sell it, they just buy it. No more.²⁰

Earlier in his interview Curtis had described that he was one to always be involved in devilment prior to 1971 when he changed his ways because he was poisoned when gambling for being able to "read them from the back better than they could from the front" (Curtis, 12).

Something that suggests he could possibly have been a mollie is that he was the only informant for the project who actually mentions how he came to physically join in a parade in the unofficial capacity that Richardson described. Though it is understandable that Curtis would deny participating as a mollie in Mardi Gras, he did describe how he paraded as part of Martin Luther King, Jr., Day celebration:

The first parade I participated in, sir I just, now I don't actually go to the parades, I don't march and all that, I just stand on the side,. . . come off the stoop, the sides, the band ladies [majorettes], yes (Curtis,17).

The Martin Luther King, Jr., parade also follows a route similar to Mardi Gras parades down the Avenue. Curtis stated, "I marched in the Martin Luther, I don't participate in that Mardi Gras," and continued explaining how he had led the first King Day parade and had his picture on the front page of the *Mobile Press-Register* (Curtis, 18). When pressed during the interview on the importance of the participation in that parade, Curtis explained "because I want to be a leader like Martin Luther King. Martin Luther King is my image, I loved him" (Curtis, 18). Here is an example of self-conscious participation in a parade/celebratory event, even though it isn't Mardi Gras. Mollies encourage those that view them to evaluate or look at their communities. Martin Luther King, Jr., contributed to Civil Rights as Curtis did through his contribution as a mollie figure, his way of participating in "the Movement." Masked, the community cannot deny Curtis his commentary and critique. Like King, he

becomes a leader mirroring community behavior.

Though he did not say that he was a Mardi Gras mollie, Curtis seemed to be able to share with remarkable detailed insight into the perspective of these clearly identifiable Mardi Gras Day performers. When asked a question about Mardi Gras specifically, the first thing that Curtis did was describe what he was wearing during the interview and refer to mollies:

Oh Mardi Gras, the first one I seen . . . This is the Mardi Gras tie. This the Mardi Gras tie . . . Mardi Gras. See when I was . . . , we had mollies (Curtis, 17).

When giving his definition of a mollie, Curtis extended the definition to include contextualization that demonstrated knowledge of the role of mollie in ritualistic play stating:

Yes, mollies is a man who dress different. He come up laughing in the parade. He does all the little comical, comical . . . I call them comical. [. . .] Then he be dressed different and the first one I liked, this guy had a chamber [pot], baby chamber, and it was like they had manure in it and he would eat it (Curtis, 17).

Being “comical,” the mollie extended the critique to the point of actually ingesting a substance from the chamber pot as part of the performance:

He would eat it and you was thinking it was doo doo. But it wouldn't be that, it would be ground up peanuts and it look just like manure when you put it in your mouth, it just waste all on . . . (Curtis, 17).

Curtis also described the inversion play of a male mollie being pregnant stating that the mollie, “could pull a doll from under the dress, like it was baby be like up under the dress. It was just fun” (Curtis, 17). This comment also indicates not only great detail into a moment of performance, but does so in active experiential language in spite of the fact that for the most part being a mollie was secretive. Mollies could be in the crowd and would be marching in

the parade, you didn't know who they were but they knew who you were and they would grab you. The children wanted to see but were scared to see.

Within Curtis's comments are an understanding of sensibilities, appropriateness, boundaries and limitations.

Humanity from Chaos

There was a shift in tradition in 1992. The Mobile Area Mardi Gras Association moved the black parade from the Avenue downtown to a route that white parading groups used. The opportunity to mask was affected by this change and mollies no longer had the opportunity to reflect and mirror the community and demonstrate how to "be art." The parade is the climatic event on Fat Tuesday that had allowed the few mollies left to move in and out of the parade, and as Nelson Curtis, Jr., says, "come off the stoop." The move from traditional black neighborhoods off the Avenue contributed to an increased manipulation of the mechanics of objectification. According to those interviewed for the Video Oral History Project, there was a notable loss of collective oneness. Joseph McCray, who was president of the Mobile Area Mardi Gras Association at the time of the shift in the tradition, indicated that the move was made because the parade had become too chaotic and dangerous, with multiple reports of violence and killings. This violence, in part, could be interpreted as a result of more and more participants becoming mollie-like in their behavior, taking advantage of the day of opposition, a particular place and space to resist oppression. This more than alludes to the success of the rituals of the event because participants in Black Mardi Gras began to recognize that this was the day that they could, as Annie Kersh explained, do "something that they had wanted to do a long time."

Participants becoming more mollie-like made parade organizers try to place boundaries and limits on the parade in order to control their chaos. Not unlike Myrtle Martin, Edley Hubbard, Annie Kersh, and Fred Richardson, who all were affected by the ritualized play of mollies as children and young adults, the youth that participated in the parades leading up to the shift in tradition recognized that their participation was an opportunity to proclaim, "this is my moment, my time to make a statement during our festival!" When the parade moved downtown the opportunity to "be art" in the same way changed. The

mask of objectification, as opposed to mollie-like behavior, is used to a greater degree downtown. The mask of objectification is a mask that works among white people in commercially codified situations, utilizing the mixed gazes that one uses the rest of the year.

In the Video Oral History Project, a key discussion of the role of mollies and, by extension, Mardi Gras, in traditional black neighborhoods in Mobile, was with Augusta Elizabeth Johnson, the most senior informant. At an age of more than one hundred, she had the breadth of time and experience to speak with tremendous clarity. More importantly, she connects the tradition of parading down the Avenue with what may seem to be the fading tradition of mollies, when what actually happened is that they evolved and adapted to the needs of those participating in the Mardi Gras in traditional black neighborhoods. Johnson understands how mollies and the festival as a whole inspires survival, personal affirmation, political action, and social revitalization, and how these principles have spilled back onto the Avenue and into a new black parade called the Children's Parade on Mardi Gras Monday.

What follows here with the help of Johnson is an explanation that joins narrating Mardi Gras in traditional black neighborhoods in Mobile to the Africatown narratives and those narratives informed by the *Clotilde* story. The way that she understands and critiques black Mardi Gras is critical to making the connection to why the narratives of Africatown and about the *Clotilde* also serve as overlaying narratives to those describing Mardi Gras. Johnson describes how a mollie in the midst of a ritualistic moment speaks directly to her and later comments on the importance of black Mobilians having their own parade:

Oh yeah! They had their own Carnival, oh that used to be nice. Sometimes, some men . . . some men used to have baby carriage with a dog laid up in there covered up and say "your mama give me to you, and I got to take care of you," and all like that you know. And women, colored women and young women, they would be in mask in the morning until about eleven o'clock. They would have their own parades and they would have buckets and cans and everything else, and tin buckets everything beating. They had their own parades, you know. Had them all and

had dogs and dressed them you know and the women would have on shoes with the bows on the shoes and the stockings and the little short dress and the bonnet you know, and the gloves on. And they would have a Mardi Gras of their own, you know, 'round the neighborhood. They'd be dressed good, I mean. But they would just have their own, you know? Have their own little parade and tin cup buckets, cans and beating it, you know?²¹

The emphasis on having “their own little parade” draws our attention to ownership and having something that one can claim as their own, both essential to making things “just work out.” The phrase “used to have” indicates the change in black Mardi Gras during her lifetime. Sharing that the mollie she encountered spoke to her, we gain insight into the ritualistic play of a male mollie inverting a common domestic activity, “your mama give me to you, and I got to take care of you.”

Johnson's description of her experience with mollies warranted more than one interview session and she gave even more detail about the dog in the baby carriage:

And then a man used live round here and at the end of Narcissus Alley and Hercules. He had a dog. A dog and he got somebody's baby carriage. He put the dog in the baby carriage and covered the dog up with a blanket. Baby blanket. And covered all parading all around, you know the street. Rolling the carriage. You say, “there go that man, he won't take his child now try hunt for to take care of his baby.” [. . .] Huh. The dog was the baby. Covered up with a blanket. I never will forget that, I'll never forget that the longest day I live. His name was Mr. Peter Early. Ah, that man, he used to do that every Mardi Gras. He'd get that baby's carriage and put that dog in that carriage and cover him up. You know this part of him. And ah, lay him up there in that carriage. And roll him, say he looking for the baby's daddy cause the daddy going bring him money, food, and stuff for the baby.²²

Johnson critiques black Mardi Gras by equating having one's own with

their control of creative labor for the festival event. Johnson claims that she isn't invested in black Mardi Gras, that she "wasn't in it and none of my folks was in it so made me no difference," yet she objects to the use and sale of creative labor solely to help create and sustain white Carnival (Johnson, 6).

The only thing that I have always hated about Mardi Gras and still now! These black folks, they get anything they wanted, don't they, any color they want, don't they, any price they want, don't they. But one thing I dislike about the black Mardi Gras is, they got to wait until the white man gets through parading and sometimes the floats is half torn, and they not, and they got to use their floats. They could rent a brand new truck and these people could make costumes, and they can make ball dresses. They could decorate a truck what they rent. I hates about them have to sit down and wait until late in the evening to have a parade and use the white folks' leavings because we have been using leavings all our lives, and why are we still, least these days, wait 'til they get through with their old floats, to have a floats in the black parade . . . (Johnson, 3-4).

As far as she is concerned progress has not been made with respect to using leftover floats, given the economic gains black Mobilians have made during her lifetime. The frustration in Johnson's narrative builds around the concept of using "white folks' leavings":

Ah, ain't no pride in that. I don't see no pride in that, still using the white man's leavings that we been done using all our lives, grandparents and as far back as we can remember still using they leavings. And why we still in these days and times, everybody supposed to be free making money then they ever made before. Why we got to wait for our . . . Because, listen I don't care it ain't got to be fancy, can be neat. You can be . . . you ain't got to have on nothing fancy to look nice. You could look nice . . . You could have on a clean shirt, a coat and pants, and you could look just as nice as a man with all this fancy stuff. All that don't make a man (Johnson, 4-5).

Augusta Johnson is a wise one indeed. She is giving instruction about “being art,” bringing humanity to the chaos of everyday absurdities and continual frustrations. And this instruction about “being art” is directly connected to the Creation Story that *Clotilde* descendent Israel Lewis III tells. In the story after the Creator teaches man everything that he needs to know in the natural world He directly instructs them to “do your own work.”²³ This is important because Johnson is saying that for black Mardi Gras to be successful, it doesn’t have to be fancy it just has to be [the community’s] own:

And they could have a float, and if people . . . I myself, I have made tissue paper, tissue paper what you make kites out of. I have been to a lady’s house and she taught me how to make roses and flowers with that bit paper. And you could do the same thing and decorate a float. Couldn’t you (Johnson, 5)?

That rhetorical “couldn’t you?” that ends the rest of the discussion reflects upon the respect that she has for doing your own work.

Johnson’s comments on “using white folks’ leavings” references the type of decision-making that contributed to moving the parade downtown on the routes of white parades. “We should make our own things. We ain’t got no business using white folks’ things now. We used enough of that years back. It’s still slavery” (Johnson, 22).

“White folks’ leavings” represents Johnson’s continual frustration with the people who purport to be the organizers of the parade and by extensions the festival. She expresses little confidence in them and implies that the celebration has been undercut by their decisions. Here I am relating her frustration with a general lack of appreciation for the narratives of Africatown and those of the *Clotilde* descendents. These narratives are vital for understanding narratives that describe the cultural performances identified with Mardi Gras. They deal more directly with the legacy of the trauma of slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and all the various self-inflicted challenges of black Mobilians. This commitment to the downtown mask of objectification, which perpetuates the very challenges black neighborhoods face, is evidenced by the continual use of other people’s

leavings and changing the location of the black parade.

Johnson's concept of using others' leavings must be linked to the initial chaos faced by the *Clotilde* Africans whose humanity was devalued as a result of being sold and shipped out of Oudiah, Benin, or Dahomey. This provides the context for how the ritualistic acts of reversal and celebrating the "upside-downness" of Carnival are needed. As stated before, when dealing with allusions to African culture in an African-American context, there are few one-to-one equivalencies. Therefore, it is important to think of Mrs. Johnson, the storyteller and narrator of the public event of black Carnival, as an artist bringing humanity to the chaos. Her narrating of Mardi Gras is mollie-like with an emancipatory and liberating effect.

Neighborhood Mardi Gras is everyone's "last chance to dance"—to borrow a phrase from a popular Mardi Gras song by the Original Pin Stripe Brass Band.²⁴ Think of the lyric, "it's your last chance to dance," as a concept. This concept suggests manipulation of the temporal reality and meaning derived from the collective experience of Mardi Gras as it contrasts with everyday life. What is representative is that the band must play on and it must do so in improvisatory terms.

Making things "just work out!"

In conclusion, it is important to consider my role as participant and researcher and how I came to recognize the resiliency inherent in this festival among black Mobilians. My experience is instructive as to how to do ethnography and collect folklore in the twenty-first century. When exploring a public event for meaning, part of the participatory nature of the researcher's role, I believe, is to share in the responsibility of ensuring continuity and participating where appropriate. Researchers should contribute to making things "just work out."

Although the data collection process for this project took place between August 1998 and July 2001, the present work truly had its beginnings, in more ways than can be acknowledged here, more than a decade ago on Fat Tuesday 1992. The following excerpt is from field notes that were handwritten in a composition book by myself and Nick Baham for a seminar course on fieldwork collection, and it is an example of the remarkable circumstances that

revolve around the event. Black Mardi Gras, or what has also been known as Colored Carnival, is a festival that deeply affects the lives and consciousness of the people who live in the traditional black neighborhoods throughout Mobile, Alabama. Ultimately, the changes that transpired in Mardi Gras throughout the twentieth century were brought about by varying factors that are narrated in very specific ways throughout the collective interview transcripts produced for the Video Oral History Project. The collection, which to my knowledge is the first of its kind, offers a glimpse through black eyes into the range of historical and cultural forces that drive this festival event. It “illustrates the impact of the historical and cultural forces on individual lives and allows us to consider the dynamics of *both* history and culture as ongoing processes and products ‘of interaction between past and present.’”²⁵

Fat Tuesday, Tuesday, March 3, 1992, I went ahead at 10 am to observe the settings up of the floats. Nick joined me at 1pm. At 1pm we observe preparations for the Black parade. Floats are lined up on St. Anthony St. outside of The Knights of Peter Claver Hall. Food and alcohol are sold outside and within the hall. St. Peter Claver is the Black version of the Knights of Columbus in many communities along the Gulf Coast, a Black Catholic organization. Most of my family, Cholly, John Finley (who runs a pharmacy in town on Martin Luther King Jr. / Davis Avenue), belong to the men’s organization. The Knights of Peter Claver Hall is around the corner from the Elks Club where drink is sold and which was, on March 1, the site of the presentation of the key to the Grand Marshal. Nick buys water at Peter Claver Hall. People in here are friendly. The atmosphere is that of family, with people sitting with their children, young children. This is supposed to be a historic parade because 6 or 8 of the floats are owned by the Mobile Area Mardi Gras Association (MAMGA). These are all of boxlike design.

Other floats are appropriated from the James Bond Parade (earlier in the week). The float that the Down the Bay Boys are using has two flats in the two front wheels. The Down the Bay Boys complain to themselves and the passing crowd about having to pay \$400 per person excluding throws (the beads and cups, moon pies, had candy, gum) to

participate. One of the more inebriated members screams and threatens to burn every single one of the floats if their float is not repaired. He claims that "it's gonna look like Saigon," and thereafter we refer to him as Saigon-man.

Wearing hats that proclaimed "Down the Bay Boys" indicating that they were from a neighborhood near the docks in an area southwest of downtown, an area somewhat newly developed in the last twenty-five years as a result of urban renewal. "Down the Bay" is a saying that indicates region and to an extent class within part of the Black community in Mobile. Other areas are Toulminville, Maysville, Prichard, and off the Avenue, Davis Avenue. But the hats that Darin K. Wilson, Joe Juzang, Juju Battles and Gerard McCants and others on the float were wearing were another identifying article so that they could be recognized prior to the parade as part of a group that is heavy with their throws.

Much more is thrown during the Black parade. There are no barricades although occasionally the police come by on horses and motorcycles to lead the parade. Sirens alert you of its approach. People get into the line of the procession.

Later we join Geri Williams, a good friend of my mother, on Davis Avenue and walk with her daughter Judy and her grandson Justin down Davis Avenue to the end of the parade route along the Avenue before it turns on Lafayette towards Springhill Avenue. People are on the streets and sidewalks seated, there are tailgate parties. We see a big woman with dyed hair and her child from the York's Barbershop that we visited earlier in the week, wearing a bright magenta outfit. We see two young children sitting on the grass sharing a Bacardi cooler. We point this out to Geri. The color of the liquid is the distinctive color of the Bacardi cooler and the label. The kids must be around ten years or younger. We stand at the place near the corner where the parade is going to turn off Davis and go down to Springhill where it will head back in an eastward direction, taking pictures and catching things off the floats, shouting to the Down the Bay Boys when they come by.

There is a bar behind us which Nick enters for a glass of water and some ice. He has to pay for it again as he did at Peter Claver Hall,

fifty-cents this time. The people who work behind the counter appear to be Creole of mixed decent. They treat you without friendliness and there isn't that knowing or familial sense in this bar that was apparent at Peter Claver Hall. They do not look at customers when they order, they do not make eye contact or conversation. Nick tries to converse with the woman behind the counter who pretends not to hear him. The lighting is poor. Most people, including Geri who enters after Nick does, come in to use the restroom. Some sit at the bar with their backs to the parade, apparently distracted from the noise of the parade. Are they uninterested?

People in the streets who know people on the floats shout their names and come up to the floats to receive things in hand. The same relationship works between us and the Down the Bay Boys and Girls. The Down the Bay Boys and Girls are noticeably drunker than any others on the floats, however on the float that carries the King and his court is a man who has sweated through his costume and carries a half pint in a pocket. The King also holds onto a bottle. Of interest are the marching bands, one of which stops in the street, they lay down their horns and do a dance to the shouting and the urging of the crowd. At almost every moment the crowd is almost pressed into the very stream of the procession and the people in the parade recognize and know many of the onlookers and there is never a sense of fear expressed by the performers, even the younger kids marching in the bands. There is an older man who we think has merely entered the parade, just jumped in, and he wears a shirt that proclaims that he is the best dancer in the world. He breaks out in quick movements, as though he had saved all his energy for this part of the parade. The crowd cheers him on.

The sirens signal the end of the parade on Davis Avenue. A child a young boy approximately aged twelve is being bandaged by emergency medics in the back of an ambulance, the ambulance that sounded the siren at the end of the parade. He is bleeding and crying, being bandaged about the right thigh. After being bandaged he is carried in the arms of a man and carried away. We walk with Geri, Judy and Justin down Davis Avenue for a number of blocks, toward their house.

When we get within a few blocks of their house we can hear the parade heading down Springhill and we decided to run down and catch it. We run for a good five blocks to catch the parade at Springhill and find the crowd even thicker here on Springhill. There is a lot of pushing and shoving. The competition for things thrown from the floats seems fiercer. The older dancing man with the shirt that proclaims that he is the best dancer in the world is a little more subdued but for only a moment and then he breaks out again with his eyes closed, sweating. The density of the crowd is much greater. When things are thrown you can but reach your hand up and hope that something falls in your grasp. However, we manage to push to the front for camera shots, and here we run around the floats to catch shots from a variety of angles.

We catch the attention of the Down the Bay Boys again. Little Joe throws Nick a Budweiser and a pair of panties. The force with which the Down the Bay Boys are throwing things has increased. There are fewer younger kids visible here. As we follow eastward with the parade down Springhill Avenue, sometimes on the sidewalk and sometimes in the midst of the procession, we notice that they are all trying to throw as hard and as far as they can. Many moon pies end up thrown beyond the reach of the crowd that is pressed in tight. This type of throwing characterizes the Down the Bay Boys who ride atop of the float but those who are on the lower part of the float and are closer to the reaching hands of the crowd will hand things to people and throw to people that they can see in the crowd. Nick gets behind the float at one point in time and one of the Down the Bay Boys threatens to throw a big plastic container in which there is a lot of water. Another of the Down the bay Boys drops chicken bones from chicken that he has just eaten into and upturned umbrella that is held before him. D.K. stands at the front and on top. He is completely drunk and doing a dance with pelvic thrust. You can hear people in the crowd shouting his name, cheering him on.

We follow the parade all the way back towards downtown where the streets are now absolutely covered with garbage. We then head back to my grandparents to compose these notes and prepare for the rest of

the evening. Walking back we come to a section where a lot of poorer whites are sleeping in beds of their trucks and along the route where the concluding white parades for Fat Tuesday will come.²⁶

These early notes were taken before the moving of the black parade off the Avenue. The formal black Mardi Gras celebration has historically taken place on Davis Avenue and spilled into other adjacent communities such as Campground, Terrel's Town on the back of Fisher's Tract, the Bottom, the Dump, and Orange Grove. The previous selection was my first exposure to Fat Tuesday on the Avenue as a researcher.

When exploring a public event for meaning, part of the participatory nature of the researcher's role, I believe, is to share in the responsibility of ensuring continuity and to participate where appropriate in the production. Here I am equating production with an individual's contribution to making the event "just work out."

Being a resource at the Museum of Mobile, talking to the head float designers, joining a social club, being appointed ball committee chairman, joining a benevolent organization, and becoming recording secretary and taking part in other satellite events helped me to get an understanding.

I am a displaced Mobilian as a result of northern migration. When I attended my first parade as an adult, I found myself calling my sister to plead with her to come experience Mardi Gras. We had experienced receiving Mardi Gras care packages in the mail. We had enjoyed the food of the season out of context and listened to discussions about the event. But it was the moment to be mollie-like in which I found myself defining in terms of understanding identity on collective community.

This moment was a flash point where I came to understand that to do competent ethnography I had to make myself more accessible before I could begin to process my first exposure to Fat Tuesday. I realized, as a result of becoming entrenched and experiencing multiple levels of day-to-day life in black Mobile, the importance of first-hand knowledge that Mardi Gras is not about uninformed "play." It is about how people position themselves so that they can experience a sense of collective oneness and an understanding that no matter what is going on in your life, everything is going to just work out.

The role of a researcher is directly connected to the process of uncovering why we survive. Like Johnson and the mollie narratives, it is about needing a reminder that chaos can be cleared up and that one's humanity can be repaired no matter how fractured. To be a competent researcher, therefore, is to go be able to be at once a "player" and a "stylizer."

A researcher ought to pry and poke in ways that are responsible to himself and to the community on which he focuses. In other words, he can't take pictures, video, and artifacts without leaving his mark. As a researcher, he can't take "other people's leavings," the researcher has to "be art" and contribute to what he studies.

When I began the Video Oral History Project, there had been no systematic narrative collection from traditional black Mobile since the early 1930s and certainly no use of digital video technology.

What I wanted was to be a mollie-like figure to reflect to youth and to other displaced Mobilians the evolution and contributions that elders and ancestors made. In other words, I wanted to show the humanity within the chaos of traditional black neighborhoods in Mobile and beyond.

In setting out to "be art" myself, I came to Mobile broke, with no grant, and took any job to support myself. I thought myself lucky to have grandparents and other elders supporting me but then I realized that it was not luck, rather it was in keeping with the tradition in black Mobile of taking on other people's children. There was a community need and all I had to do was listen to the wise ones and it would "just work out."

When I moved from doing odd jobs to being a museum curator I was called to attend a meeting in Plateau where community members essentially told me that they needed me to do an oral history project. I went from having no grant to administrating one of a more than reasonable amount for a project which would be funded by the City of Mobile. I would also be afforded the opportunity to partner with and house the project in the neighborhood museum located on the Avenue, the National African American Archives and Museum. As a result of taking advantage of the possibilities and trusting in the wise ones, I was given a second year of support in the form of an additional grant for the same amount.

Curiously enough, in keeping with the themes of giving back and ensuring

continuity and participating where appropriate, an elder whom I was unable to interview contributed to the idea of a concluding program or ritual for the project. Arealia Craig, an Africatown descendent and one of the voices that called for an oral history project, had been a major organizer of heritage programs in and around the Plateau/Magazine point area. She refused to participate formally in the Video Oral History project because she felt, much like Johnson feels about aspects of the black Mardi Gras parade, due to past experiences with other researchers, that the project was about my personal mask of objectification rather than a collective oneness. The result was a concluding ritual event on the grounds of the National African American Archive and Museum, off Davis Avenue and across from Stone Street Baptist Church, the oldest Baptist Church, black or otherwise, in Alabama.²⁷

As part of the celebration of the project's conclusion, we invited informants to come to a Video Oral History Field Day. We also invited children from local recreation centers and summer programs. Three tents were set up so the children could listen to the project informants tell about their neighborhoods. We also had a tent set aside for a museum education specialist to teach the children how to do oral history interviews through neighborhood mapping and other activities. Perhaps the most satisfying part of the day for all involved was when the children, elders, and others in attendance formed a huge circle in the field. A smaller group of children from that summer's Freedom School program²⁸ made a circle in the middle and Lou Burden represented the elders by standing in the middle of them. What ensued was a libation ceremony, and as the children each made their petitions known to the ancestors, Burden returned water from a pitcher to the ground. After this pouring of libation, we recognized and presented certificates to the informants/elders. Then Israel Lewis III stepped forward to tell the Creation Story.

It was at this point as we all listened to Lewis tell this story at the center of the community circle that I knew I had reached that "intersecting point of the crossroads to perform the ritual gesture of uniting the past and the present."²⁹ Sitting at the feet of the wise ones, I had experienced that part of the Creation Story Israel Lewis III tells, which states "I made you, you are mine," knowing that I had been "equipped with everything [I] needed" (Lewis, 9). ■

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Notes

¹ "Boomalatta" or "Boom Boom" is the name given to parades in traditional Black neighborhoods in Mobile, Alabama. It references the music of the bands, particularly bass drums, as well as noise made by revelers on floats. It also represents a certain level of excitement on the part of attendees.

² Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road: an Autobiography*, 1942. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984) 174.

³ Samuel Kinser. *Carnival, American Style: Mardi Gras at New Orleans and Mobile*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) xix-xx.

⁴ The Video Oral History Project was a two-year ethnographic study that accessed and documented the role of the fieldworker as participant in pursuing an understanding of the depth and texture of community identity of African Americans in the understudied Gulf Coast community of Mobile, Alabama. Specific events, which on the surface appeared "commonplace," were interpreted. The method used was to become a "wise one" apprenticing and listening as researcher and meshing community-articulated needs with a research agenda. Ethnographic data was used as a tool to understand the fluidity of shifts in tradition as related to cultural geography. Preserved on digital video, the personal narratives addressed formal questions about migration, employment, and leisure time activities—particularly the construction of "black" Mardi Gras.

⁵ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. (San Diego: Harcourt, 1983) 264.

⁶ Kinser, xix-xx.

⁷ Both texts, self-published in Mobile, Rayford's in 1962, and Chaudron's in 1912. Also see, Samuel Eichold, *Without Malice, The 100th Anniversary of the Comic Cowboys, 1884-1984*. (Mobile: R. E. Publications, 1984).

⁸ Albert Murray, *The omni-Americans: New perspectives on the Black experience and American culture*, (New York: Outerbridge and Dienstfry, 1970) 89-90.

⁹ Robert Petty, personal interview, 23 Dec. 1997, 3.

¹⁰ Addie Antoinette Taylor Reed, personal interview for Video Oral History Project, 20 Aug. 1999, 14.

¹¹ Edley L. Hubbard, personal interview for Video Oral History Project, 5, Aug. 1999, 12.

¹² Myrtle Fisher Martin, personal interview for Video Oral History Project, 7 Aug. 1999, 20.

¹³ Joseph A. Brown, SJ. "African Art & Black American Aesthetics," Lecture at the

- Montgomery Museum of Art, Montgomery, 16 Sept. 1999, 4.
- ¹⁴ Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy*, (New York: Vintage, 1983) 107.
- ¹⁵ Annie Louise Kersh, personal interview for Video Oral History Project, 22 June 2000, 15.
- ¹⁶ This parade is one that was also founded by people of color in response to early twentieth-century Mardi Gras segregation.
- ¹⁷ Frederick Douglass Richardson, personal interview for Video Oral History Project, 2 March 2000, 13.
- ¹⁸ *The Clotilde* was the last ship to bring kidnapped Africans into Mobile, and the second to last to be documented in the United States. It was commissioned by a slave-owning Confederate planter and launched as part of a wager to break through the Union Navy blockade.
- ¹⁹ Mabel Dennison, personal interview for Video Oral History Project, 15 July 1999, 31.
- ²⁰ Nelson Curtis, Jr., personal interview for Video Oral History Project, 19 Feb. 2000, 17.
- ²¹ I visited and interviewed Augusta E. Johnson on three occasions. This quotation came from a more informal and brief conversation included in the project transcriptions. Augusta E. Johnson, personal interview, 11 Nov. 1998, 2.
- ²² Augusta Elizabeth Johnson, personal interview for Video Oral History Project, 3 Dec. 1999, 22.
- ²³ Israel Lewis III, personal interview for Video Oral History Project, 1 July 1999, 9.
- ²⁴ "Last Chance to Dance" was recorded in 1994 by The Original Pin Stripe Brass Band, under the direction of Herbert McCarver. This New Orleans brass band, organized in 1977, is the official band for the Zulu Social Aide and Pleasure Club's annual Mardi Gras Ball and parade.
- ²⁵ Nancy J. Martin-Perdue, Charles L. Perdue, Jr., eds., *Talk About Trouble: A New Deal Portrait of Virginians in the Great Depression*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 1996. 1.
- ²⁶ Excerpt from field notes.
- ²⁷ Richardson stated: "Oh, yes, as a matter of fact, I wrote, I did the history of Stone Street Baptist Church. I think a copy is in this library. It . . . we published it. As a result of that work we became . . . we were placed on the National Register of Historical Places, as a National Historical Site by the U.S. Department of the Interior. I have also since written a play, 'The Birth of a Church,' and this play will be at the Saenger Theater, March 9th and 10th. We premiered at the National Baptist Headquarters in 1996. In 1997 we went to the Birmingham Jefferson Civic Center. We have left, we have not been here, the city is pretty much in denial. We just have rich history. If David Crockett had listed Mobile and stopped and ate at a certain

place, it would have been a monument so tall, we would almost have to lay down to look over it. Here we are in this city with the first Baptist church in the state of Alabama and it happens to be a black church. Who could have imagined? They had a church in Huntsville, Alabama, Flint River Baptist Church. The Southern Baptists had that in 1808 as the oldest Baptist Church. They challenged us saying 'it's impossible for you all to prove.' They had to come back and say, 'well, you beat us out.' 'We beat them out' (7).

²⁸ During the summer of 2000, Ms. Mattie Shepard was the site coordinator for the Children's Defense Fund Freedom School held at Florence Howard Elementary off Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue. A Freedom School is a partnership between CDF's Black Community Crusade for Children (BCCC) and local community organizations, churches, and public schools that provide literacy-rich summer programs in communities where those opportunities are otherwise limited or nonexistent.

²⁹ Brown, Joseph A. *To Stand on the Rock: Meditations on Black Catholic Identity*. (New York: Orbis, 1998) 25.

In Memoriam: Bicky McLain, 1905–2004

John Bealle

Beatrice Kane “Bicky” McLain, an international folklorist, dance leader and educator, died April 3, 2004, in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. She was ninety-eight.

McLain’s work as a folklorist was largely inspired by English and Danish scholars, and her efforts were often devoted to collecting and teaching traditional music and dance. In 1938 she helped found the Christmas Country Dance School at Berea College, a weeklong school established to keep alive Appalachian dances and music. She taught community dance groups in Lexington, Kentucky. After World War II, she took a group of dancers to the International Scout Festival in England. Her work was noticed by an English folk musician who asked her to put on annual demonstrations. For the next twenty-one years, McLain ran the Anglo-American Summer Course in Folklore under the auspices of the English Folk Dance and Song Society. She also taught courses in traditional dance for the United Nations in Vienna and for the U.S. State Department on ships crossing the Mediterranean Sea. She often performed with her children and grandchildren, who are accomplished folk music performers.

McLain, the widow of Raymond F. McLain, who was president of Transylvania College in Lexington from 1939 to 1951, followed her husband to several colleges, including Eureka College in Illinois and American University in Cairo, Egypt. He came to the University of Alabama as Dean of International Programs and Vice President of Academic Affairs, and she served as Foreign Student Advisor.

In 1966, she founded the Center for Southern Regional Folklife Studies at the University of Alabama. At the time, McLain was among only a few



FIGURE 1
The late Bicky McLain.

folklorists to embrace the concept of folklife, which has now become the dominant approach in the field. In this, she was most strongly influenced by Danish folklorists, who shared her view of folklore as an ongoing, holistic encounter.

The Center for Southern Regional Folklife Studies was operative during a time when few other folklorists were active in Alabama. With only a small staff, McLain conducted fieldwork and collected throughout the state. She also served as a public relations conduit for traditional arts during a time when folklore was emerging as a popular concern.

The Center offered no courses in the University curriculum, but McLain nonetheless had a profound influence as a mentor. Normally students found their way to her by noticing the sign in front of the small Center building, which was situated on a prominent campus street. Only the most enthusiastic ventured inside, where they could arrange a weekly tutorial session if there was mutual interest. In this setting McLain was simply a brilliant educator, nurturing the interest of her students with suggestions for reading, fieldwork, or travel. Some, such as John Bealle, Deborah Boykin, and Joe Goodwin, attribute to her the formative influence of a lifetime of achievements in folklore and folklife. ■

Book and CD Review

Judge Jackson and the Colored Sacred Harp by Joe Dan Boyd. Introduction by John Bealle. Includes CD recording *The Colored Sacred Harp and the African American Shape Note Tradition*, Alabama Traditions, 109, produced by Steve Grauberger. Alabama Folklife Association, 2002. \$25.

ANNE KIMZEY

Judge Jackson and the Colored Sacred Harp by Joe Dan Boyd tells a story of an important figure in the African-American Sacred Harp singing tradition in southeast Alabama and the ways in which his legacy continues. Judge Jackson (1883-1958), a shape-note singer and composer, published *The Colored Sacred Harp* in 1934. The book is a collection of seventy-seven songs written in the four-shape-notation, “fasola” tradition of *The Sacred Harp* songbook (1844). By the 1930s, both black and white singers of the Wiregrass region of southeast Alabama were singing from an updated version of the old songbook, known as the Cooper revision, or “Cooper book.” Jackson had the inspiration and talent to create a song book written by and for the black singing community. Under his leadership, he and a handful of singers composed and arranged songs for *The Colored Sacred Harp*. Even during the Depression, Jackson, a successful farmer and businessman, was able to publish one thousand copies of his book, which according to Boyd, “probably stands not only as the sole volume of ‘white spirituals’ compiled by a black man, but also as the only completely new collection of four-shape compositions since John G. McCurry published the *Social Harp* in 1855.”

Joe Dan Boyd researched the black Sacred Harp tradition as a graduate

student in folklore at the University of Pennsylvania in the late 1960s. In his prologue, he describes learning of the obscure little songbook and his efforts to learn more about the author. He was able to track down Japheth Jackson, Judge Jackson's son and dedicated preserver of the tradition, who willingly shared information with Boyd, a white Texan, despite the tense racial climate in the state in the late 1960s. In his initial manuscript, Boyd drew on recollections from Japheth and other Jackson family members, singer Dewey Williams, information from prior researchers, and Judge Jackson's own autobiography for a fascinating portrait of this overlooked musical pioneer.

Originally Boyd's manuscript was to be published as a monograph by University of Pennsylvania's folklore department, but the publication series was discontinued due to lack of funding. He published a brief summary of his research in a 1970 *Journal of American Folklore*. In 1999, a collaborative effort between the author, the Alabama State Council on the Arts, and the Alabama Folklife Association and funding from the Blount Foundation enabled work to begin for the purpose of updating and publishing Boyd's work as a book and CD.

The dark blue, 160-page book, designed to resemble a hardcover revision of *The Colored Sacred Harp*, is 6¼ inches tall and 9 inches wide, the approximate size and shape of the book it honors. The cover illustration, titled "Sing It Brother," is from a watercolor by Ozark, Alabama, artist Jack Deloney. The scene commemorates an emotional moment at the 1991 Jackson Memorial singing when Judge Jackson's son John opened the singing with "Amazing Grace" and asked his brother Japheth to key the song. (p. 115).

The book consists of a table of contents, acknowledgments, dedication, introduction, prologue, manuscript, epilogue, end notes, bibliography, notes to the compact disc, index, separate index to songs mentioned in the text, and CD song listing.

The introduction was written by Sacred Harp scholar John Bealle, who co-edited the book with Joyce Cauthen, director of the Alabama Folklife Association. In the introduction is a helpful timeline or "Chronology of Events" in African-American Sacred Harp singing tradition. One chronological inaccuracy should be noted, however: Dewey Williams received his NEA National Heritage Fellowship in 1983, rather than 1991, the year he was featured with

other NEA Fellows in *National Geographic*.

The body of the book consists of Joe Dan Boyd's original manuscript, written in 1969, plus his epilogue, which brings the tradition up to date. The manuscript is primarily a biography of Judge Jackson with the focus on Jackson's involvement in Sacred Harp singing and his publication of *The Colored Sacred Harp*. Boyd also explores the previous scholarship on the music tradition and the cultural context of Sacred Harp singing in southeast Alabama.

The epilogue brings the tradition from the late 1960s into the 1990s and covers the Wiregrass Singers' appearance at the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife in 1970, ethnomusicologist Doris Dyen's research in the late 1970s, the publication of the Wiregrass Notes LP and the reprinting of the *Colored Sacred Harp* in the 1980s, Bill Moyer's *Amazing Grace* documentary for PBS (1991), a tribute to National Heritage Fellowship recipient Dewey Williams, and the annual Jackson Memorial Singings. Boyd also discusses another black Sacred Harp singing community in Mississippi.

The book is well illustrated with photographs, most presumably taken by Boyd himself, some by prior researchers such as John Work and Ralph Rinzler, and many other historic photos provided by the Jackson family.

In addition to the text, a CD and notes to the compact disc are included at the end of the book. The CD features twenty-seven songs, ten from the *Sacred Harp* (Cooper Revision) and seventeen from the *Colored Sacred Harp*. These are taken from recording sessions spanning more than thirty years beginning with John Work's field recording in 1938 to Doris Dyen's 1972 recordings and include songs from a coin-operated recordisc (an early vanity recording system) session in 1950, WOZK radio sessions in 1968, and Ralph Rinzler's 1965 recordings of the Alabama-Florida Southeast Union Convention. The CD was produced by Steve Grauberger of the Alabama Center for Traditional Culture from the original recordings. ■

Book Review

Mobile Ghosts: Alabama's Haunted Port City by Elizabeth Parker. Apparition Publishing Company, Mobile, Alabama. 2002. \$9.95.

ALAN BROWN

Since the publication of *13 Alabama Ghosts and Jeffrey* in 1969, folklore writers in Alabama have labored under the long shadow cast by Kathryn Tucker Windham. While it is true that no other Alabama author possesses Windham's flair for transforming local legends into highly entertaining stories, she has not written the last word on the subject. There are still many old tales floating around the state that have not been published in book form. One of the most successful recent attempts to breathe life into previously unpublished stories from Alabama's haunted past is Elizabeth Parker's *Mobile Ghosts: Alabama's Haunted Port City*.

Strictly speaking, *Mobile Ghosts* was written for a general audience. Although Parker identifies all of her informants by name, she does not provide the sources for the historical background that forms the introduction for ten of the book's fourteen stories. Unlike W. K. McNeil's *Ghost Stories from the American South* or William Lynwood Montell's *Ghosts along the Cumberland*, *Mobile Ghosts* lacks notes listing the date the stories were collected, personal information on the informants, and the motifs present in each story. However, even purists would applaud Parker's decision to allow her informants to speak for themselves instead of paraphrasing their uncanny experiences. Because most of these ghostly encounters are narrated by what Swedish folklorist Carl Wilhelm von Sydow terms "active bearers," they are imbued with a sense of

drama that few second-hand or third-hand tales possess.

Although the absence of any scholarly apparatus limits *Mobile Ghosts*' usefulness for folklorists, the general reader will probably be grateful that Parker has focused her attention on making her strange little tales readable and suspenseful. The buildings featured in the book are divided into three categories: "Haunted Places to Visit," "Haunted Offices," and "Haunted Houses." All but one of the stories—"The Phoenix Fire Museum"—are set in historic homes. The wise decision to include photographs of the interiors and exteriors of the houses will certainly enhance the book's broad appeal, especially those pictures that illustrate specific areas where paranormal events took place. Even though similar ghostly phenomena manifest themselves throughout the book (*e.g.*, shadowy figures, eerie footsteps, strange laughter, etc.) boredom rarely sets in because many of the old residences have been transformed into restaurants, museums, massage parlors, and office buildings. Most of the tales deal with houses that have a storied past as well as a ghostly present. History buffs will be particularly interested in "That Must Be Our Lady," "The Ghosts of Oakleigh," "The Phoenix Fire Museum," and "The Richards-DAR House," all of which achieve a balance between the historical background of the buildings and the supernatural activity. The most convincing stories are the ones in which the strange occurrences are reported by more than one witness. The story entitled "Peggy's Window" comes the closest of all the tales to the work of Kathryn Tucker Windham, to whom the book is dedicated. This fascinating story of the haunting of a century-old home on Government Street unfolds like a detective story as the author recounts the Helmer family's attempts to uncover the identity of the spectral little girl who has been sighted for years staring out of the attic window.

Like many collectors of ghost tales, Parker occasionally succumbs to the temptation to use her stories as proof of the existence of the supernatural. A case in point is the story entitled "The Museum of Mobile," which focuses on a mysterious artifact. Parker's supernatural explanation for the appearance of the artifact overshadows the possibility that a prankster or a donor who wished to be anonymous might have been operating behind the scenes. She also peppers her stories with observations gleaned from "ghost hunters," such as her statement that staircases often serve as a kind of "hospital portal for those who are,

themselves, ‘tween’ [two worlds]” (36). The final story in the book, “Stay for a While,” recounts a paranormal investigation of a single-story Mobile home by the Mobile Area Ghost Club. Although lapses in objectivity are subject to criticism in a scholarly work, one can forgive them in a book whose purpose is clearly to inform and entertain.

My personal favorites were the five stories included under the heading “Haunted Places to Visit.” Speaking as a reader whose interest in Mobile’s haunted places has been aroused by Parker’s enjoyable little book, I wish that she had included phone numbers and directions to sites that are open to the public. Nevertheless, lovers of “true” ghost stories should be glad that Elizabeth Parker was not too intimidated by Kathryn Tucker Windham’s enduring legacy to make her own contribution to Alabama’s ghostlore. ■

Book Review

Out of Sight: The Rise of African American Popular Music, 1889–1895 by Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson. 2003. \$75.

JOEY BRACKNER

Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff have produced a monumental work on the formative period of African-American popular music during the Gilded Age and before the invention of sound recording. As the authors point out, this was a time of unprecedented violence against African Americans. The term “out of sight,” associated with the beat culture of the mid-twentieth century, was, in fact, used during the 1890s as an expression of significant artistic achievement. Though “out of sight” of mainstream white popular culture, important developments in the music of blacks during this period directed the course of American popular music. Alabama musicians played an important part of this story. For example, the book recounts the impressive accomplishments of Alabama State Normal School (now Alabama A&M University) founder William H. Councill and the State Normal Quartette. In 1894, they made a daring tour through north Alabama performing before mixed-race audiences, raising money and generating positive publicity about their school.

The underpinnings of the book are more than a decade of the authors’ research of historically black newspapers. Like many historical works, theirs is arranged in a chronological format. But they further emphasize the timeline of artists and styles by actually numbering their seven chapters year by year from 1889 through 1895. There is also a chronological structure within each chapter. Abbott and Seroff offer meticulous analysis from their sources including

newspapers, primary documents, and interviews, illustrated with 150 halftones from period publications. The reaction to this book has been very positive, selling out in less than two years after publication. The University Press of Mississippi has already reprinted a second hardback edition.

Lynn Abbott is an independent music researcher who lives in New Orleans. His work, including collaborations with Doug Seroff, has appeared in *American Music*, *American Music Research Journal*, *78 Quarterly*, *The Jazz Archivist* and elsewhere. Doug Seroff is an independent research/writer living in Greenbrier, Tennessee. His work with African-American gospel harmony quartets has resulted in the production of record albums, documentary videos and special concert presentations, including the landmark 1980 "Birmingham Quartet Reunion." He has written numerous journal articles, book chapters and program booklets on aspects of black folk and popular music. In *Tributaries 5*, Abbott and Seroff contributed the article "The Life and Death of Butler 'String Beans' May," taken from their upcoming book about the emergence of blues in early black vaudeville, 1899–1925, which will cover the time period after *Out of Sight*. They will also be publishing a collection of essays on African-American music covering the period 1878 through the 1930s. Two long essays, "The Spirit of the Smart Set," and "Coon Songs and Big Shows, the African American Stars of Ragtime" will also be published soon in Chris Ware's *The Rag-Time Ephemeralist*. Abbott and Seroff have been well-known authorities in the widespread network of gospel music and blues connoisseurs. Their in-depth research of African-American music has led them back in time to a period when the sounds were not captured on cylinders or discs but were described to a popular audience in newsprint. With *Out of Sight*, they give us an intimate look at the rise of African-American, commercial music. ■

Recording Review

Traditional Musics of Alabama, Volume 4: Wiregrass Notes Revised. Alabama Traditions 204. Produced and digitally mastered by Steve Grauberger of the Alabama Center for Traditional Culture from original 1980 recordings by Stephen McCallum. Includes twelve new songs not on the 1982 *Wiregrass Notes* LP. Original song notes by Doris Dyen. Additional song notes by Steve Grauberger. Revised introduction by Hank Willett. CD recording with liner notes, Alabama Folklife Association. Release date Fall 2004. \$12.50.

JIM CARNES

W*iregrass Notes*, the latest installment of the Alabama Folklife Association's Traditional Musics series, brings a landmark 1980 recording into CD format and makes available for the first time twelve songs not included in the 1982 LP and 1988 audiocassette releases, nearly doubling the playlist. The CD captures an African-American tradition of Sacred Harp singing in full vigor, with the voice and spirit of the late Dewey Williams at its fore.

Nearly a quarter century after its creation, the recording is also a timely reminder that the rising tide of shape-note revival during the same period has not lifted all boats. With each passing year, African-American Sacred Harp—as most famously embodied by *The Colored Sacred Harp* and its adherents—moves closer to what tradition-bearers and observers alike fear will be its last refrain. Documents such as this one offer a distinct challenge—and perhaps a useful tool—for the growing national community of singers intent on reclaiming lost shape-note traditions.

In the past twenty-five years, the steady expansion of “fasola” singing from its Southern stronghold back into its former territories of the Northeast and Midwest and beyond has fueled interest and activity not only in the dominant Sacred Harp tradition, but also in numerous other pathways of the genre. In Boston, Chicago, St. Louis, Atlanta, Minneapolis, Seattle and other settings, singers are combing archival shelves, breathing life into songbooks such as *Missouri Harmony*, *Harmonia Sacra*, *The Social Harp* and others left dormant for more than a century. It is disappointing, if not surprising, that this renewal has thus far (with a few scattered exceptions) remained racially homogeneous.

The annual Rotunda Singing held in Montgomery on the Saturday before the first Sunday in February brings together devotees of the four oblong shape-note hymnals used in Alabama—*The Original Sacred Harp*, *The Sacred Harp (Cooper Revision)*, *Christian Harmony*, and *The Colored Sacred Harp*. Modeled on the longstanding Capital City Singing in July, this seven-year-old event follows a simple rotation from book to book in half-hour sessions, four in the morning and four after lunch. The task of “arranging,” or calling leaders to the floor, likewise passes in succession to individuals representing each book and its “community.”

Cumbersome as the book-swapping and committee-changing may be in contrast to the well-oiled machinery of the typical one-book singing, the Montgomery four-book gatherings have assumed a special importance on the singing calendar. This review is not the place for a full defense of that claim, but one aspect of it sheds a useful light on the recording under consideration. As the better-attended of the two Montgomery singings, the Rotunda Singing has become the primary intersection between white and African-American traditions of Sacred Harp. (I purposefully did not say “*the* white and *the* African-American,” because variations of both exist elsewhere.)

In southeast Alabama, singers from both communities have long attended each other’s annual local singings, and particularly the remaining handful of African-American singings and conventions continue to welcome the support of white visitors from the surrounding area and further afield. The National Convention in Birmingham nearly always attracts a delegation of African-American singers from the Wiregrass region. But in each of these cases, the shared experience is shaped largely by the repertoire and leadership of the host

community. The Rotunda Singing offers the rare opportunity for adherents of these traditions (including also the represented variants on “white” shape-note tradition) to collaborate in a performance that respectfully suspends the usual historical and aesthetic categories.

At the recent 2004 session, the class of more than one hundred singers (from as far away as Minnesota) included only four members of the Wiregrass group. With help from the other contingents, the morning’s *Colored Sacred Harp* segment proceeded smoothly. At one point in the afternoon session, Japheth Jackson appeared at a loss for someone to lead a particular selection. He proposed ending the session there. Then, from the doorway behind him, a voice called out, “Why don’t I take that one, Pop?” It was Jackson’s daughter, Janice Johnson, just arriving. The sudden glow of possibility in her father’s face seemed for a moment to outweigh the numerical evidence.

Wiregrass Notes arrives at a critical time, when the heyday it represents is still a living memory. In his re-mastering of the original Nagra reel-to-reel recordings, producer Steve Grauberger has improved the clarity and balance of many cuts without sacrificing warmth and atmosphere. Especially noteworthy among the newly available material are “Winning Souls,” with its tenors and altos vying for dominance, and the triumphal “Praise the Lord.” The latter was composed by Bascom Franklin Faust, mayor of Ozark, Alabama, from 1937–40. He wrote this and numerous other songs for the Cooper Revision but was the only white songwriter represented in *The Colored Sacred Harp*, with his “Eternal Truth Thy Word.”

Grauberger’s liner notes for the added selections rise to the standard set by Doris Dyen’s on the original release, also included here. Both commentators provide well-researched historical and musicological profiles of each composition, as well as thoughtful analysis of the particular performance in the context of usual practice. Such thorough documentation—in both sound and text—will prove invaluable to the revival movement that, one hopes, will someday extend to this corner of the shape-note world. ■

Contributors' Notes

KERN MICHAEL JACKSON is a visiting instructor of English this academic year at the University of South Alabama. Mr. Jackson, a Mobilian and the former curator of minority history for the Museum of Mobile, is an active lecturer in the areas of oral history, material culture, and literary folkloristics. He recently received his Ph.D. in Folklore from Indiana University at Bloomington and is currently writing a book entitled, "*Listening to the Wise Ones: Personal Narrative as a Window into Traditional Black Neighborhoods in Mobile, Alabama.*"

TINA NAREMORE JONES holds a Ph.D. in American Literature from the University of Southern Mississippi. Her dissertation focused on the work of Alabama folklorist Ruby Pickens Tartt. Jones is an associate professor of English at the University of West Alabama, where she serves as faculty advisor for *The Life*, UWA's student newspaper, and as co-director of the Livingston Press, UWA's on-site publishing house of offbeat and/or Southern literature. She co-edited *Belles' Letters: Contemporary Stories of Alabama Women*.

LORI SAWYER was born in Atmore, Alabama, and educated at the University of West Florida. Her interests in culture, research, family, and intergenerational relationships are strongly influenced by the work of her mother, Gail Thrower, Cultural/Archives Director for the Poarch Creek Indians. Lori's work has been featured in Florida and Alabama museums, including a photography exhibit entitled, "If I Tell You My History, Can You See Through My Eyes?" She illustrated the book *Grandmother Five Baskets*, named one of the "Most Notable Trade Books in the Field of Social Studies for 1994" by the National Children's Book Council.

Reviewers

JOEY BRACKNER is the manager of the Folklife Program of the Alabama State Council on the Arts and coeditor of *Tributaries*, the Journal of the Alabama Folklife Association. Since 2003, Brackner has also been interim director of the Alabama Center for Traditional Culture. His research interests include Alabama folk pottery, traditional graveyard decoration and southern horticultural traditions. Joey Brackner received a B. A. in Anthropology from the University of Alabama at Birmingham and an M. A. in Anthropology from the University of Texas at Austin.

ALAN BROWN is a professor of English at the University of West Alabama. Since 1990, Dr. Brown has presented many lectures on Alabama folklore, including “Alabama’s Legendary Outlaws,” “Alabama Deathlore,” and “Alabama’s Haunted Places.” Dr. Brown’s publications include *The Face in the Window and Other Alabama Deathlore* (1996), *Shadows and Cypress* (2000), and *Haunted Places in the American South* (2002).

JIM CARNES, a former editor of *Tributaries*, directed the documentary video, *Sweet Is the Day: A Sacred Harp Family Portrait* (2001). When not pursuing labors of love in folklife, he works as publications director at Alabama Arise.

ANNE KIMZEY is a folklife specialist at the Alabama Center for Traditional Culture and co-editor of *Tributaries*. She received her B.A. in Journalism from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where she also pursued graduate studies in folklore. For the past fifteen years she has researched and documented a variety of Alabama’s folk traditions. Most recently she produced two traveling exhibitions, *Water Ways: the Traditional Culture of Alabama’s River Systems* and *In the Garden: Traditional Culture and Horticulture in Alabama*.



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- Sweet is the Day: A Sacred Harp Family Portrait* (\$20 DVD or VHS, please specify) produced by Erin Kellen and directed by Jim Carnes: In this hour-long video members of Wootten family of Sand Mountain speak of their long and deep involvement with shape-note singing and sing more than a dozen hymns from *The Sacred Harp*. An accompanying booklet

provides historical information and further explanation of shape-note traditions.

- *Tributaries, Journal of the AFA*, Vol. 1 (\$8). Contains essays on the great shoal fish trap, Mobile Bay jubilees, quilting, occupational folklore, more.
- *Tributaries, Journal of the AFA*, Vol. 2 (\$8). Contains essays on Hank Williams, revival of interest in Indian tribal ancestry, Alabama's outlaws, cultural roles of African-American women in the Wiregrass, and more.
- *Tributaries, Journal of the AFA*, Vol. 3 (\$8). Contains essays on graveshelters, the Skyline Farms, the Piney Woods Regional Folklife Project, geophagy, and more.
- *Tributaries, Journal of the AFA*, Vol. 4 (\$8). Contains essays on contemporary Christmas curb lights in Birmingham, Creek Indian migration narratives, the Ballad of John Catchings and more.
- *Tributaries, Journal of the AFA*, Vol. 5 (\$10). This special thematic issue contains essays on Alabama's blues topics such as Butler "String Beans" May, Ed Bell, "Jaybird" Coleman, Willie King, Vera Ward Hall, and "John Henry."
- *Tributaries, Journal of the AFA*, Vol. 6 (\$8). Contains essays on Alabama's first folklife celebration, "FolkCenter South"; family reunions; pre-Columbian highways; and more.
- *The Traditional Musics of Alabama: A Compilation, Volume 1* (\$12.50). This CD is the first in the Alabama Center for Traditional Culture's Millennium Series, produced by Steve Grauberger. It presents a delightful and well-recorded variety of children's games, work songs, sacred music, fiddle tunes, blues and other forms of music traditional to Alabama collected by musicologists and folklorists over the last 50 years.
- *The Traditional Musics of Alabama: A Compilation, Volume 2, African American Seven Shapenote Singing* (\$12.50). This CD is the second in the Alabama Center for Traditional Culture's Millennium Series, produced by Steve Grauberger. It features African American singing conventions in Alabama that practice a unique form of gospel singing using the repertory of southern gospel music known as "seven shape," "new book," or "little

book” singing. Many familiar songs are featured, most sung a cappella.

- Traditional Musics of Alabama: Volume 3, 2002 National Sacred Harp Singing Convention* (\$12.50) This CD is the third in the Alabama Center for Traditional Culture’s Millennium Series, produced by Steve Grauberger. Recorded June 14th 2002 at the National Sacred Harp Convention at Trinity United Methodist Church, Birmingham, Alabama. Program notes were written by John Bealle.
- John Alexander’s Sterling Jubilee Singers of Bessemer, Alabama*, (\$10). This cassette recording features Jefferson County’s oldest African American a capella gospel group.
- Jesus Hits like an Atom Bomb*, (\$15). CD version of the Sterling Jubilee cassette described above.
- Cornbread Crumbled in Gravy: Historical Alabama Field Recordings from the Byron Arnold Collection of Traditional Tunes* (\$12.50). This box set includes a 64-page booklet and a cassette featuring field recordings of folk, gospel, and parlor tunes recorded in 1947.
- Traditional Music from Alabama’s Wiregrass* (\$10). A CD capturing bluegrass, gospel, blues, and Sacred Harp singing as done in Southeast Alabama.
- The Alabama Sampler* (\$12). A CD featuring live performances at City Stages of Alabama blues, bluegrass, Sacred Harp, Gospel, railroad calls, etc.
- Benjamin Lloyd’s Hymn Book: A Primitive Baptist Song Tradition* (\$18 softcover, \$25 hardcover). A book of essays exploring Alabama’s oldest hymnal, published in 1841, and enclosed CD with twenty examples of ways in which congregations sing from it.
- Judge Jackson and the Colored Sacred Harp* (Book/CD, \$25) This 160-page hardbound book and CD by Joe Dan Boyd with an introduction by John Bealle tells the story of Judge Jackson of Ozark, Alabama, who in 1934 published *The Colored Sacred Harp*. It also describes the formation and rise to prominence of the Wiregrass Sacred Harp Singers, led by Dewey Williams and Japheth Jackson. The enclosed CD contains 2 historic recordings in which Judge Jackson participated and 23 others from *The*

Colored Sacred Harp as well as the Cooper version of *The Sacred Harp*.

NON-AFA PRODUCTS OF RELATED INTEREST:

- Rich Amerson* (\$7 for cassette, \$10 for CD). Folk tales and songs recorded in Livingston, Alabama, in 1961.
- Possum Up a Gum Stump: Home, Field and Commercial Recordings of Alabama Fiddlers* (\$9 for cassette, \$15 for CD). Contains rare recordings of nineteenth century fiddlers and field recordings of twentieth century fiddlers who played in older styles. Twenty-four-page liner notes.
- White Spirituals from the Sacred Harp: The Alabama Sacred Harp Convention* (\$10 for cassette, \$15 for CD). Alan Lomax recorded these shape-note songs from the Sacred Harp in 1959 in Fyffe, Alabama.
- The Colored Sacred Harp* (CD, \$15). The Wiregrass Sacred Harp Singers of Ozark, Alabama, sing from Judge Jackson's 1934 compilation of shape-note songs.
- Desire for Piety* (CD, \$15). A rare example of black Sacred Harp singing from rural southeast Alabama as sung by the Wiregrass Sacred Harp Singers.

