The Mississippi River and Images of the Twentieth-Century South

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As in the nineteenth century, the Mississippi River continues to be an iconic symbol of Southern identity. It has been the channel through which major Southern history, music, literature, art, film, travel, legends, and myths flow. Not surprisingly, though, Southern views and representations of the river in the twentieth century have been as varied as the river itself, which, through its currents and floods, has altered Southern geography. Moreover, because of vast cultural changes in the South the river speaks a different language than it did in nostalgic antebellum fiction or Twain’s adventuresome tales. The Mississippi has been personified as a menacing foe as it was in the catastrophic flood of 1927 or a place to interrogate and challenge Southern memory. Yet the river can also be a place to reflect on theology. In 1941, William Alexander Percy spoke of “the great river, the unappeasable god of the country, feared and loved” (Lanterns). And in 2015 poet Kirk Woodward eloquently claimed that the Mississippi “can be a prayer” (Down to the Dark River 190). The ten essays in this special issue on the Mississippi River explore and emphasize the complex relationships between Big Muddy and images of the South.

The opening essay by Thomas Ruys Smith studies the cultural life of the Mississippi River at the beginning of the twentieth century through a wide variety of its representations in novels by Southern writers like George Washington Cable, Mary Noailles Murfree, and Ruth McEnery Stuart to travel articles published in major illustrated journals as well as in Tin-Pan Alley songs that reached audiences nationwide. Smith argues that, in diverse ways, these texts all emphasize the river as a multivalent symbol of the South.
at a key moment of transition. As he points out, “Antiquated, obsolete, stagnant; a former symbol of wealth and industry now characterized by poverty, nostalgia and romance; a space powerfully defined by racial hierarchy: the steamboat still plying its trade (or simply decaying) on the Lower Mississippi, and the roustabout still loading and unloading her cargo—all became perfect synecdoches for the South in popular culture at this moment.” While these texts reflect an earlier era in the life of the river and the South, Smith believes they also foreshadow the river as an agent of change, and, in previously unacknowledged ways, shaped an imagined Mississippi that would emerge in the later decades of the twentieth century, most particularly in Edna Ferber’s defining *Show Boat* (1926).

Historian Christopher Morris next assesses the Mississippi’s cultural impact through cartography. He claims that the shape of the southern half of the Mississippi River, with its meander loops, is as iconic as the river itself and concludes that it is no wonder Mark Twain called the Mississippi the “Crookedest River” in the world. Morris argues that perhaps no image has captured the wandering Mississippi better than the colorful maps produced in 1944 by Harold Norman Fisk for the Mississippi River Commission. These maps depict a time when the river moved without restriction, seeming to offer proof that twentieth-century engineering was a mistake. Yet Fisk maintained that the image of a crooked river was a relic of the past reflected through the title he used for his maps, “Ancient Courses of the Mississippi River,” reprints of which, by the way, are sought after today as objects of popular art. The Mississippi, Fisk steadfastly maintained, was naturally straightening itself out, cutting off its many bends, deepening its channel, and seeking to contain itself within its banks. Morris insists, therefore, that Fisk’s maps were not intended to portray the river’s movement; actually they predicted stasis. Ironically, they have become proleptic reminders of what engineering and nature would do to the river over the decades.

While Twain (see studies by Creighton; Dix) and Tennessee Williams (Kolin) are among the Southern authors who have frequently included the river in their works, other writers have also acknowledged the Mississippi’s iconic role in Southern culture. In the midst of the Depression, for instance, William Faulkner looked back to the Great Flood of 1927 for the setting of “Old Man,” one of the two narrative sections comprising his novel *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* (1939). Explaining the importance of the river in these texts, Ted Atkinson stresses that Faulkner’s turning to the recent history of the flood was timely, given that natural disaster narratives popular in the 1930s. It also created a critical space for exploring how the form of modernism achieved in *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* emerged as Faulkner channeled the legacies of realism circulating in popular culture. As Atkinson points out,
“This relational technique enacts the emergence of modernism from realism and thus suggests an alternative to the oppositional models defining relations between the two movements generally and Faulkner’s response to the realist tendencies in Depression culture particularly.”

Though the presence of the Mississippi and other rivers in Eudora Welty’s fiction received earlier attention (Millichap), Pearl McHaney provides a tightly focused study of how Welty incorporates the river into her Southern landscapes. According to McHaney, “The place from which Welty writes of the Mississippi River is on the mighty river’s shores and tributaries.” The towns along the Natchez Trace, Natchez itself, Vicksburg, as well as Welty’s Rodney, become places where her characters interact with the Mississippi. They “look out from and under the bluffs at Natchez and Vicksburg; [yet] they move away from these river cities or yearn to escape” them “on the shore of the river.” As McHaney underscores, the river and these shore towns came alive for Welty through her reading Mississippi histories, taking excursions with friends on the river, and through keen observations of the Southerners who lived near or on the river. McHaney concludes that throughout Welty’s fiction, in the short stories and the novels, she reveals a respect for the power and dynamism of the Mississippi as both frontier and border.

Reading Shirley Ann Grau’s fiction, Alison Graham Bertolini argues that the Mississippi River was a place of transition where unknown dangers approached from without and moved inland, upriver, threatening the lives and livelihood of residents. Interpreting the river’s importance in Grau’s “Joshua” (1955), The Hard Blue Sky (1958), and The Condor Passes (1971), Bertolini demonstrates how her characters “strive to succeed economically and socially within the setting and mythology of the Mississippi River,” and maintains that “the characters’ struggle for identity is paralleled and reflected by the changing state of the river.” In “Joshua,” for instance, Grau uses a World War II German submarine coming up from the mouth of the Mississippi as a powerful signifier of how danger lurks both on and under the surface of the great river menacing a Southern fishing community.

Explaining the various musical forms that can trace their origin to the river, Michael Allen sheds light on the importance of country, gospel, blues, jazz, and rock and roll. He first surveys the contributions of musicians and the recording studios and radio stations from Louisiana to Missouri and beyond that played the vibrant, river-induced scores that millions of Americans listened to, danced to, or sang. But then he focuses on the origin, birth, and early development of rock and roll in the Mississippi River Valley as river music. Allen significantly finds that rock and roll originated in a place where African American culture “was most thoroughly blended with that of Anglo-Celtic Americans” and concludes that “One of the tragic ironies of American history
[insofar as the Mississippi is concerned] is that black and white musical form thus became integrated in a “racially segregated environment.”

Phillip Gentile’s following essay turns to how nineteenth-century panoramas influenced Bill Morrison’s experimental documentary film, The Great Flood (2013). Gentile believes two key movements converged in Morrison’s film, the first being how the Mississippi River panorama served as a “precursor to the cinema" and shared with Morrison an "aesthetic of reenactment." Then, secondly, Gentile turns to how Morrison represented the Great Flood of 1927 by incorporating and “recontextualizes deteriorating cellulose nitrate footage” to “explore the role of the cinema as both a witness to historical events and a meditation on human mortality.” According to Gentile, Morrison’s aesthetic approach to the flood “offers an intimate and modified vision of Southern identity forged through struggle, survival, and migration.”

Travelogues and memoirs also supply valuable evidence about the river’s iconic status in the twentieth-century South. Barbara Eckstein explicates Eddy L. Harris’s Mississippi Solo: A River Quest (1998) as a relevant and revealing example of a distinctive travel narrative. A young African American writer from St. Louis, Harris paddled a canoe from the headwaters of the Mississippi to New Orleans. Ironically, Eckstein argues, Harris was fulfilling both a dream and encountering a nightmare. In a nightmare repeated from his childhood that he shared with readers, Harris and his family are unable to cross the Mississippi on a bridge, and they plunge into the crocodile-infested water. Seen in the aftermath of the farm crisis that crippled small towns in mid-America, Harris’s journey “repeatedly [gives him] a seat among strangers, human and more than human.” In doing so, he created a nonfiction persona attuned to the ecological and economic conditions of the Mississippi affecting human beings and other species. Eckstein insightfully concludes by asking if Harris might not also belong in the company of “the postcolonial, nonfiction writer-activists for the environmentalism of the poor,” the topic Rob Nixon celebrates in his book Slow Violence (2011).

Sheryl St. Germain’s “River-Shaped: Growing up at the Mouth of the Mississippi” is a lyric essay, a reminiscence of a native New Orleanian who grew up less than a mile from the Mississippi. Specifically, St. Germain’s essay concentrates on the two New Orleans locations associated with the Mississippi—the riverine area around the French Quarter and Plaquemines Parish—the home of many of her ancestors. Her eloquent and insightful essay weaves family stories into her reflections about the cultural and environmental impact of the Mississippi in a contemporary South. Juxtaposing Harris’s travelogue alongside St. Germain’s memoir-like article enables readers to appreciate the widely differing emotions the river has evoked in twentieth-century Southern life and letters.
Concluding this issue, Jianqing Zheng’s “The River’s Business” exhibits photographs about how the Mississippi has created various economies, especially through the casinos which resemble antebellum steamships, along the Lower Mississippi and thus imprint its identity as a vital transportation artery. But the lasting impression one receives from viewing Zheng’s photographs is of the Mississippi moving in silent rhythm with nature, the blues, and the people whose life’s work and dreams are one with the river.

Finally, there are two masthead changes I need to announce. I am happy to welcome Paul Mariani, the internationally respected biographer and poet, to the Editorial Board and look forward to receiving his sage advice. Sadly, Lin Harper, the assistant dean in the College of Arts and Letters at Southern Miss and the executive editor of The Southern Quarterly, is retiring in June. We wish her every blessing and thank her for her years of service to our university.

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WORKS CITED