Guest Editor’s Introduction

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This special issue of *The Southern Quarterly* on *Photography and the Shaping of Southern Culture* began in 2014 when Philip Kolin asked me to suggest a topic that might work for Summer 2015. I then was finishing a new book on photography and selected Southern writers, which now has been accepted for publication by Louisiana State University Press in 2016 as *The Language of Vision: Photography and Southern Literature in the 1930s and After*. So I proposed an issue extending my comparative consideration of photography and letters in the South to other aspects of the regional culture as broadly defined by the new Southern studies. The title is intended to suggest the importance of photography, not just in reflecting Southern culture, but in refining it as well. After almost a year of effort, I believe that this special issue has developed into an intriguing montage of people, places, and things as visual and verbal, as well as spatial and narrative images that help reveal the historical shaping of Southern culture. In support of this central purpose, our special issue is organized by the forms of our contributions and by a rough chronology of Southern photographic history.

For example, our first three articles all concern very early photography in the South, especially the daguerreotype. Although Terry Ownby teaches photo and media studies at Idaho State University, he is a native Southerner whose scholarly interests focus on the historical and cultural development of Southern photography in the nineteenth century. His essay here reconstructs the careers of two mostly forgotten daguerreotypists who were active in antebellum Mobile, Alabama, and postbellum Anderson, South Carolina, to demonstrate the colorful and complicated evolution of the photographic
arts in Southern culture over half a century. If the intertwined personal and professional histories of Chauncey Barnes and Harry E. Wallace often appear prosaic, the images they left seem poetic testimony to their importance as early exemplars of the power inherent in the photograph to record, read, and ultimately shape the human landscape of the South.

The daguerreian puzzle posed by Levon Register II in his brief article presents some of the problems addressed by Ownby in his scholarly reconstruction of early Southern photography. An arresting, yet anonymous daguerreotype portrait provides teasing clues to the identity of its subject, a striking figure who seems a person of substance. Register’s research connects him with the Rev. Dr. John Leighton Wilson, a Presbyterian missionary to Africa before the Civil War. Born to a South Carolinian plantation family, Rev. Wilson supported Abolition and repatriated his slaves to Liberia. References to other, clearly identified portraits of Dr. Wilson are found in Register’s piece, and readers can come to their own conclusions about these questions. If anyone has other evidence bearing on this identification, Register would be happy to hear about it.

Kent A. McConnell’s contribution, “Photography, Physiognomy, and Revealed Truth in the Antebellum South,” nicely complements the pieces by Register and Ownby in terms of photography and religion, though he provides a different approach in regard to physiognomy. That antebellum pseudo-science attempted to interpret character in terms of physical appearance, and quite naturally promoted the American and Southern prejudices regarding gender, race, and class common to that era. If individuals could be read in this manner, so could their photographic portraits, which were considered to be the perfect mirrors of their subjects. Most fascinating in McConnell’s study is the extension of both of these essentially visual endeavors to the dead as important aspects of the pervasive fascination with death in nineteenth century America, especially during the Civil War and in the South. He thus concludes with a provocative reading of documentary photography by Matthew Brady and his colleagues during the Civil War.

Cultural criticism recently has more closely considered documentary and vernacular photography, images distinct from those consciously created with formal artistic purposes in mind. This change in emphasis is especially marked in regard to Southern working people, both white and black. The prevailing cultural images of such Southerners were established by photographers like Doris Ullman and Walker Evans during the Depression years, and they persist into the present. In addition to documentary photography, a source of differing imagery has been discovered in the work of commercial photographers, “picture men,” in particular ones who developed their trade and their craft among the very people they came to represent.
Tonnia Anderson, a professor of American studies, reconsiders the canon of one such figure, Richard S. Roberts, an African American commercial photographer active in the black community of Columbia, South Carolina, during the early twentieth century. Although some scholars have assumed that studio photography presents an overly optimistic portrait of the black community during segregation, Anderson argues that positive images created by photographers like Roberts add dimensions that provide depth to our understanding of an evolving African American culture. For Anderson, artistic and documentary photography often denies the subjectivity and agency of Southern blacks, qualities better seen in the work of Roberts and others like him.

Rob McDonald, an English professor at Virginia Military Institute, combines his professional work in Southern literature and his personal interest in photography by documenting the homes of Southern writers, in particular of Erskine Caldwell. His efforts in these connections have already lead to several publications, and his portfolio on Robert Penn Warren’s hometown of Guthrie, Kentucky, will become part of a new book on similar matters. As a Warren scholar myself, I know the writer’s life, work, and home place quite well. I often have visited Warren’s birthplace in Guthrie, and I can attest to McDonald’s rare skill in capturing the place that generated the man and his work in both visual and verbal images. Another connection in these regards is that Warren was taken with photography, and photographic tropes often appear in his fiction and poetry.

The Southern Quarterly proves a most appropriate venue for Chuck Cook’s insightful homage in words and pictures to the documentary photography of his mentor and friend Ed Wheeler. Both men have a considerable connection with The University of Southern Mississippi, the sponsor of this quarterly journal of arts and letters in the South for more than a half century. After an earlier career with Dallas newspapers, Wheeler taught photography at the university for more than twenty years and settled in Hattiesburg after his retirement. Cook, a student of Ed’s in the late 1980’s, worked at New Orleans papers for over two decades, and he returned to the university to teach photojournalism and serve as faculty advisor to student media.

In the early 1980s, a period of transition in his personal life and professional career, Wheeler spent his summers working as a laborer on oil rigs in the Gulf of Mexico. If these sojourns were an escape valves for a mid-life crisis, then they also became documentary projects in pictures and words. Only partially published at the time, Ed’s conversational reminiscences motivated Chuck to search out forgotten archives in Texas as well as Mississippi. The results as seen here are striking; Wheeler is not just a fine photographer, but his documentation records the changing South. The personal and cultural
innocence that pervades these images predate the natural and human disasters that have altered the southern Gulf coast over the past thirty years.

The dozen examples presented here from Bradley Phillips’s much longer series of photographs, “Settling for the Unsettling,” form a representative montage of their own within the larger pattern of this issue. In his prose introduction to his photographic images, Phillips references his unsettled feelings while walking the older streets of his adopted home place, a southern river city now changing along with the rest of its region. Phillips’s visceral reactions to the loneliness of these urban landscapes also unsettled his photographic routines, impelling him away from any artifice toward unmediated documentation of abandoned buildings, vacant lots, and crumbling sidewalks.

Yet the unstudied artfulness of Phillips’s pictures reveals another meaning in his ambivalent title that also fits the overall themes of this issue. We see how the areas first settled along the river are recreated inland on the suburban heights. In another sense, Phillips is settling into the unsettling of Southern cityscape. Most noticeably, no people are found here; instead the viewer can only imagine the Southerners who populated these places in the past. Fading traces of families in empty homes, of shoppers in shuttered stores, and of workers in abandoned factories all prove details that become spatial analogues to Southern historical narratives.

Jodi Skipper and David Wharton, colleagues in Southern studies at the University of Mississippi, prove well prepared for their collaborative documentation, analysis, and interpretation of traditional African American Mardi Gras celebrations in Louisiana. Skipper, an anthropologist engaged with the material culture of the South, is also a native of Lafayette, the cultural capital of Acadiana. Trained in photography and in American studies, Wharton has created three photographic books focused on cultural aspects of small towns in Texas. This recent collaboration provides an arresting visual focus and intellectual challenge within the montage that this special issue has become, especially in terms of Wharton’s colorful images and Skipper’s cultural criticism.

Indeed, the striking contrast between the black and white historical photos of Lafayette’s African American Mardi Gras festivities and Wharton’s recent work in vivid colors becomes a visual metaphor for Skipper’s cultural analysis. As historical research shows, such black celebrations are traditional, but they became better organized in the late 1950s as an assertion of African American identities. Like the limited spectrum of the older photographs, a black/white binary defined Mardi Gras as well as most other aspects of culture in segregated Lafayette. Skipper ably demonstrates that traditional, historical, and recent activities all reflect a more diverse and colorful heritage involving hemispheric aspects of the black diaspora, particularly regarding Caribbean influences.
The contribution to this special issue that best represents the re-shaping of culture in the South today perhaps is found in John Howard’s presentation of the Jones family within their Mississippi setting. He creates a smaller montage within the issue’s larger montage in terms of both his pictures and his prose. His images balance between sensitive portraits of the Joneses and thoughtful location of them in contrast with the material culture that surrounds them in a Southern town. In his introduction, Howard asks more questions than he answers, preparing his viewers to search out their own interpretations from his documentation of the changing cultural landscape in the South.

Howard is a professor of American studies at King’s College London. He is a native Mississippian, however, who has published widely about the South and who is also recognized as a documentary photographer. His work has focused on the cultural production of human difference and the resulting social consequences in regard to gender and sexuality understood within contexts of race, class, and region. Thus his understanding of the Jones family is professional, but it also proves personal as they have long been friends. So he can conclude that the Joneses are all courageous as they redefine family formation within the conservative cultural setting of Mississippi.

These articles, essays, and portfolios that make up most of our special issue on photography and the shaping of Southern culture are complemented by a half dozen ekphrastic poems by widely-published poets Joe Survant and Claude Wilkinson. Survant’s contribution, “After Seeing Photos of Iwo Jima,” suggests images of that Pacific battle intertextual with one of himself as a baby by an uncle returned from the war to Owensboro, Kentucky, in 1945. Wilkinson titles his portfolio of four ekphrastic poems, “Half Past Autumn,” while the individual selections bear the titles of the photographs taken in segregated Alabama during the 1950s by the well-known African American photographer Gordon Parks. Finally, writer and photographer Billy Middleton provides a sensitive and thoughtful review of Maude Schuyler Clay’s recent photographic collection *Delta Dogs*, with its subject and style quite appropriate to this special issue.

As guest editor of this special issue of *The Southern Quarterly* on photography and the South, I do thank all involved—including general editor Philip Kolin, former executive editor Lin Harper, and, most especially, managing editor Diane DeCesare Ross.

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