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Richard H. King and Helen Taylor (eds.), *Dixie Debates: Perspectives on Southern Cultures*. (New Yorlt: New York University Press, 1996). 242 pages, ISBN 0-814-74684-5, $17.95 paperback

Although the American South is constantly experiencing rapid and radical economic and political changes, its mental image and cultural reality still heavily rely on the past. Even certain fields of contemporary culture, some of them as distinct from each other as the

upper-middle-class life-style periodical *Southern Living* or the raucous; hard-nosed Southern rock of Lynyrd Skynyrd, make vigorous use of myths of the past. However, the Southern past is not a unified one, nor is the South today; it is characterized by an abundance of intermingled and contradictory cultures and values which simply cannot be discussed in unison. This is the main idea behind this book and provides an excuse for its eclectic nature.

In addition to the editors' introduction and Richard Gray's afterword, *Dixie Debates* consists of twelve expanded conference papers originally presented at the first European interdisciplinary Southern cultural studies conference at Warwick in September 1994. The topics range from Alice Walker to Cajun identity, from Elvis Presley to black-oriented radio, from D. W. Griffith to African-American visual art. The areas touched upon include literary studies, musicology, sociology, history: art, almost anything regarded as part of cultural studies. The book is loosely organized into three sections – Southern Cultures; Southern Music, and Southern Images – but the division is by no means strict, or even noticeable.

In 'African and European Roots of Southern Culture: The 'Central Theme' Revisited,' Charles Joyner addresses the most pivotal controversy of the South, the racial issue. With ample evidence from the history of popular music he shows how the 'white' as well as the 'black' forms of music have actually developed interdependently. Even the stereotypically white redneck country music pays great homage to blues. It is only with the black and white strings interwoven together that the Southern fabric has received its characteristic color – not just in music but in all other aspects as well.

Paul Binding and Maurie Lauret both take a look at Southern literature. Binding reads it as reflecting the two-sided nature of Southern mentality through historical and seasonal time, especially well displayed in the reworkings of Southern myths by William Faulkner and Eudora Welty. Lauret deals with blues and literature as expressed and created by African-American women. Challenging the current orthodoxy she sees the two art forms not as equivalents but as genres of their own. However, she also sees them both as carrying universal features which enable Billie Holiday fans as well as Alice Walker readers from any ethnic background to gain a better understanding of some of the special characteristics of the black women's reality.

In 'L'Acadie Retrouvée: The Re-making of Cajun Identity in Southwestern Louisiana, 1968-1994,' Robert Lewis depicts the vicissitudes of the French-oriented, though usually no longer French-speaking, Cajun minority of Louisiana with a historian's precision. Although the ties between modern Cajun people and Old Acadia have grown weaker, the ethnic consciousness, now strongly related to Cajun food and music, has been revitalized, at the same time as multiculturalism has been promoted by political and educational measures. This is largely due to the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL), founded in 1968 by the state legislature. Lewis's text as such is informative but would have benefitted from a few maps, since it is full of geographical references.

Diane Robets ironically describes how *Southern Living,* one of the most profitable magazines in the USA today, makes conscious use of the idyllic image of the Confederate plantation life, while at the same time turning a blind eye to the divisive and difficult political issues of the present. The method seems to pay, since the popularity of this Southern lifestyle bible among white upper-middle-class Southern women is guaranteed.

Simon Frith criticizes the way Elvis Presley has to a large extent been neglected by acadeinic scholars. Elvis fans have been studied more than the man himself and many of the academic references to the 'King,' including some of Frith's own, only repeat conventional views without a slightest attempt at a proper scholarly research on the subject. In other words, 'The Academic Elvis' – the title of Frith's paper – scarcely exists. Partly this is due to the unfortunate fact that Elvis studies are often done by people who do not recognize the true nature of the artist's talent, because they lack true affection for his work. With this observation Frith's article expands into a more general criticism against any kind of academic research without genuine interest in its subject. According to Frith, such study is worthless.

As a man who is committed to Southern Boogie and the bottle of Jack Daniel's, Paul Wells is easily able to avoid Frith's critique; he is fully entitled to analyze the thematic modes characteristic to his favorite bands, Lynyrd Sltynyrd, Doc Holiday, Charlie Daniels Band, .38 Special, Allman Brothers Band and the like. In his article, Wells shows in explicit terms how the values of the white South, embodied in the idealistic and mythical figure of 'the Rebel', have preserved themselves in the slightly infantile world of masculine Southern rock.

Racial issues, so rarely dealt with in Southern rock, are brought to the fore again by Brian Ward and Jenny Wallter. In "Bringing the Races Closer'?: Blaclt-Oriented Radio in the South and the Civil Rights Movement,' they make a distinction between commercial and non-profit-malting black-oriented radio stations. The former, whether black- or white-owned; are mainly dedicated to the musical entertainment of their audience, although at times they have contributed to the growing sense of blaclt identity and produced educational programs. The non-profit-making broadcasters, however, are the ones that today provide the best news and information services for the blacli community.

New Orleans is ltnown as the birthplace of jazz and the scene of a continuous fireworks of music, and the image is dearly cherished by the local tourism promoters of the present. However, as Connie Zeanah Atliinson in almost sarcastic tones observes, the musical community of New Orleans and the local tourist business seem to have less understanding for each other today than ever before, even though some of the earlier conflicts between the musicians and the municipal authorities have long since been forgotten.

Richard Dyer's and Jane Gaines's articles on cinematic reflections of the South function as comments on each other. While Dyer concentrates on D. W. Griffith's emblemic film, *The Birth of a Nation*, Gaines compares the classic with its recently rediscovered black equivalent by Oscar Micheaux, *Within Our Gates*. Both movies represent an attempt to come to terms with the nation their malters are part of, although with somewhat amusing results as these thorough analyses reveal. Despite its evidently opposite aims *The Birth of a Nation* succeeds in showing how the white South is not really as white as the white supremacists want it to be. The black and white history of the region is mixed, not only at a communal level but also at the level of individual families. Micheaux legitimizes the blaclt heritage of the nation by pointing out that the African-American population actually arrived before the Irish; the Italian, and the Chinese – and the blaclts were never immigrants.

As Judith McWillie points out, in 'Traditions and Transformations: Vernacular Art from

the Afro-Atlantic South,' there are certain peculiar forms of Southern visual art that manifest the African influence of the Congo region that still survive today. An original union of ordinary, commonplace objects and spirituality continues to express itself in objects of art and imaginatively decorated graves and private yards that have been met with perplexed reception; while local sheriffs at times destroy yard shows as a result of complaints by neighbors and passers-by: some of the better-ltnown artists of the same tradition are able to sell their work for as much as $120,000.

As expected, the picture of the South created by *Dixie Debates* is fragmentary and incoherent, or, to put it nicely, multiplex. There is not a single theme or perspective touched upon by all, or even most, of the articles, and, in this sense, anyone loolting for a thorough pacltage of information on some special field of interest will most liltely be disappointed. However, as the book is not meant to be an in-depth study of a special problem but rather a platform of interdisciplinary discussion on the peculiarities of the South, it deserves to be read by anyone interested in Southern studies. By bringing out the diversified nature of the South and its cultures the anthology will surely offer new perspectives for most of its readers; in fact, it is even more true to the nature of its subject than a more unified work might be.

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