

Reviews

Mikko Saikku. *This Delta, This Land: An Environmental History of the Yazoo-Mississippi Floodplain*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005. 373 pages; \$54.95; \$22.95 (paperback); ISBN 0820325341

The Mississippi Delta is unquestionably one of America's most famous landscapes. The setting in numerous fictional as well as historical works, the Delta has formed a framework for stories of plantation life, community, slavery, Civil War, and civil rights that have become central to America's collective memory. But from an environmental point of view, very little attention has been given to this unique region. In his book *This Delta, This Land: An Environmental History of the Yazoo-Mississippi Floodplain*, Mikko Saikku, Finnish professor of environmental history, sets out to change that.

In his book, Saikku weaves together economic, cultural, social, and environmental concerns in a proclaimed interdisciplinary approach in order to identify the most significant patterns of environmental change in the region since the arrival of the first human beings; and he does so with an impressive and frightening result. Over the course of just one century the Delta has seen close to 60 percent of its forest lands disappear due to agricultural clearings or logging practices, while several species have either become extinct or balance on the brink of extinction, because of extensive hunting or the destruction of natural habitats.

The book opens with a brief theoretical history of environmental studies, which nicely sums up the major developments that have led to the idea of Environmental History as a separate discipline, while placing Saikku's own work firmly in that tradition. The second order of business is to establish the Delta as a distinct bioregion worthy of such a study; a goal which Saikku attains through the study of old pollen data, ancient tectonic movements, and volcanic activity.

Through a description of the realities of hunting and farming methods practiced by pre-Columbian native cultures, practices that were often less environmentally sound than Noble Savage stereotypes and certain Disney productions would have you believe, Saikku breaks with some of the clichés that have distorted environmental studies in the past. In his portrayal of the populous pre-Columbian civilizations that inhabited the American Southeast, Saikku presents evidence that the ivory-billed woodpecker, for example, was hunted to the brink of extinction because of the ornamental value of its beak.

Through an account of the rise and fall of the New South's cotton kingdom, the story unfolds of how America emerged as the world's largest producer of cotton in the early 20th century, but also of the environmental price the region paid for that position. Subsequent chapters explain how short-sighted lumber practices furthered deforestation, and the importance of river control in a region with a growing population and an agrarian dream. Because although farmers in the Delta indirectly benefited from the frequent floods that created the depth and fertility of the topsoil, the de-

structive powers of the rivers still clashed with modern cultural ideals of prosperity and land ownership. Thus, in a history that leads up to, and beyond, the great flood of 1927, Saikku shows how people sought to mediate the realities of the landscape with their own dreams through levees and flood-storage reservoirs.

Although the book is highly interesting, well-written, and educational, it is unfortunate that the cultural analysis has been limited to scattered Faulkner quotes, some letters and diaries, and a few references to blues songs. From an American Studies point-of-view, and considering the bulk of available and relevant cultural material dealing with the environmental themes of the Delta landscapes, too little cultural information has been used and that which has found its way into the text seems oddly un-integrated.

All in all, however, Saikku has written a very interesting and relevant book. While the wide historical scope makes *This Delta, This Land* a good introduction to environmental history, the attention to detail ensures that it does not become boring or repetitive even for the trained environmentalist. Instead Saikku manages to educate the reader on the, mostly, troubled past relationship between the peoples of the Yazoo-Mississippi floodplain and the natural environment of that region in a study that seems more relevant today than ever.

Torben Huus Larsen

Odense, Denmark

Nikky Finney, *The World Is Round*. Atlanta. InnerLight Publishing, 2002. 109 pages; \$29.95; \$14.95 (paper). ISBN 0-9714890-3-3

When did you last read a whole book of poetry? If you are like most people, it has been a while, and you probably only read it because you had to. Maybe you went through the ordeal of reading some poems to upgrade your intellectual status in the local reading circle, or in order not to fail an English course you had registered (and paid) for in a state of reckless disregard of reality. Or maybe you did not want to disappoint your romantic partner by revealing that – except for the lyrics of country music or rap – you never listen to poetry and prefer to read sadistic crime fiction. And since the depressive experience in youth of being forced to read long convoluted passages of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, you have had a total and, you are convinced, everlasting aversion to poetry and anything vaguely similar.

Nikky Finney offers you a collection that will allow you to discover that you could do worse than read poems. Shut the door on the mentally challenged in the TV room, read "Fishing among the Learned," who are not the academics but fly-fishers "who know real life bestows no terminal degrees," from Finney's *The World Is Round*. In spite of your old poetry phobia, you will be hooked and to your surprise want to read more. A reader needs to fly-fish in the deepest pond to catch glimpses of privileged information.

The poet grew up in Conway, S.C., was inspired by Nikki Giovanni and Toni Cade Bambara's poetry, and published her first poems *On Wings Made of Gauze* in 1985. Nikky Finney is now 49 and teaches creative writing at University of Kentucky, but