Table of Contents

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Guest Editors' Introduction: The Arkansisters Issue

163

by Brookshield Laurent and Lauri Umansky

"Arkansisters": Engaging in Self-Help Activism as a Holistic Praxis

164

by Cherisse Jones-Branch

The Slow Massacre: East Phillips and North Desha Counties, Arkansas: Then and Now (edited presentation)

168

by Jennifer Hadlock

Race, Gender, and Hoodoo in the Arkansas Delta: The Case of Caroline Dye

173

by Wendy Onek

Cold Summer (fiction)

181

by Ann Robinson

Gertha Bailey Trice: A Daughter’s Reflections on a Mother Who Transformed Arkansas Delta Communities through Self-Help Activism (interview)

187

by Swity Sultana Monni

Self-Help Activism in a Traumatized Community: Womanist Ideals in Grassroots Initiatives (photo essay)

197

by Faisal Mohammed

The Legacy Midwife: A Native Arkansan Vows to Carry on a Heritage of Healing

203

by Donna L. Shelton

Mental Health Awareness for Black Women and Girls in the Delta: An Interview with Clinical Psychologist Dr. Patricia Griffen (interview)

211

by Loretta McGregor

Delta Sources and Resources

216

515 South Gee Street
Jonesboro, Arkansas
by Shobhithan Kandamasy

Reviews

221

Jones-Branch, Better Living by Their Own Bootstraps: Black Women’s Activism in Rural Arkansas, 1914-1965, reviewed by Dawn Herd-Clark

Nicholas, The Mama Chronicles: A Memoir, reviewed by Kristen Ruccio

de Silva Jayasuriya, Leitão Pereira, and Hansen, eds., Sustaining Support for Intangible Cultural Heritage, reviewed by Virginia Siegel

Kayser, Marginalized: Southern Women Playwrights Confront Race, Region, and Gender, reviewed by Cherisse Jones-Branch

Wippermann, Joan of Arkansas, reviewed by Guy Lancaster

Olivarius, Necropolis: Disease, Power, and Capitalism in the Cotton Kingdom, reviewed by Lucy C. Barnhouse

Miller, Port of No Return: Enemy Alien Internment in World War II New Orleans, reviewed by Edward Salo

Blevins, Up South in the Ozarks: Dispatches from the Margins, reviewed by Lauren Adams Willette

Bokelman and Evans, Going Up the Country: Adventures in Blues Fieldwork in the 1960s, reviewed by Gregory Hansen

Alexander, Resistance in the Bluegrass: Empowering the Commonwealth, reviewed by Lisa Perry

Contributors

238


THE
ARKANSISTERS
PROJECT

Guest Editors' Introduction: The Arkansisters Issue by Brookshield Laurent and Lauri Umansky

This issue of Arkansas Review is guest-edited by members of the Arkansisters Project: A Delta Initiative for the Heritage, Health, and Human Rights of Women and Girls. The Arkansisters Proj- ect represents a collaboration spearheaded by Ar- kansas State University's Heritage Studies PhD Program and the Delta Population Health Institute of New York Institute of Technology's College of Osteopathic Medicine at Arkansas State University. The Arkansisters Project advocates for the health and well-being of women and girls through- out the Arkansas Delta through education, com- munity engagement, policy development, research, writing, preservation, archival activity, and cultural and artistic expression and programming. Our transdisciplinary approach integrates population health and public policy, as well as the humanities, social sciences, and arts, for the express purpose of challenging and addressing the impediments to health, human rights, and social justice currently and historically experienced by women and girls in this region. Typically, when people think of health, they refer to care received in clinical and hospital set- tings. While access to health care is vital in a com- munity, a substantial amount of data shows that the significant drivers of "health outcomes" are the conditions where we live, learn, work, play, and worship, commonly referred to as the social deter- minants of health. The study of population health underlines the health disparities among multiple populations categorized by race/ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, geography (rural vs urban), and disability, to name a few examples. Painfully, the Mississippi Delta region registers the most significant health disparities in the United States. To date, Arkansas has the highest mortality in mothers and infants and is one of the lowest- ranked states in heart disease, diabetes, cancer, and obesity. Our region also has one of the highest con- centrations of poverty and food-insecure homes. These challenges are not new or accidental but due to centuries of institutionalized, legalized, discrim- inatory injustices. The cost of lives due to health disparities calls for equity among the social factors that significantly drive health outcomes. According to the Robert Johnson Foundation, "Health equity means that everyone has a fair and just opportunity to be as healthy as possible. This requires removing obstacles to health such as pov- erty, discrimination, and their consequences, in- cluding powerlessness and lack of access to good jobs with fair pay, quality education and housing, safe environments, and health care." Despite harrowing challenges in the Delta, as we learn from historian Cherisse Jones-Branch in the groundbreaking study, Better Living by Their Own Bootstraps: Black Women's Activism in Rural Ar- kansas, 1914–1965, and in her essay in this issue, courageous women in Arkansas have long exercised their agency and power to educate, innovate, create, build on community assets, and mobilize for jus- tice, equity, health, and wholeness. As Jones-Branch and each of the contributors to this volume insist, the self-help initiatives of so many women in our communities, past and present, are vital to the heal- ing of inter-generational trauma that impacts

the health and well-being of Delta communities. Like the women whose life stories of resistance to social injustices fill these pages, we must all embrace our roles as healers in our own communities. With gratitude to Donna Shelton, as project manager and lead editor, and to the entire team of Heritage Studies doctoral students who helped to bring this issue of Arkansas Review into existence (Shobhi Kandasamy, Faisal Mohammed, Swity Sul- tana Monni, Corrina Neal, and Abigail Wilson), we join you on the all-important journey toward health equity and wholeness for all.

Contributors

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Jennifer Hadlock, MSW/JD is a community organ- izer, genealogist, and movement lawyer. She learned about the Elaine Massacre of 1919 as a Board member of the Fund for Reparations Now!! and was sub- sequently invited by the Elaine Legacy Center to re- search land ownership and theft in Phillips County, Arkansas, and to document the oral histories of Black descendants of the Elaine Massacre.

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Dr. Cherisse Jones-Branch is Dean of the Graduate School and Professor of History at Arkansas State University-Jonesboro. She received her BA and MA from the College of Charleston, and a doctorate in History from The Ohio State University. Dr. Jones- Branch is the author of Crossing the Line: Women and Interracial Activism in South Carolina during and after World War II and the co-editor of Arkansas Women: Their Lives and Times. A second manuscript, Better Liv- ing By Their Own Bootstraps: Black Women's Activism in Rural Arkansas, 1913–1965, is now available from the U of Arkansas P. Jones-Branch is currently working on a third book project titled ". . . To Make the Farm Bureau Stronger and Better for All the People": Afri- can Americans and the American Farm Bureau Fed- eration: 1920–1966. She is also the co-editor of the newly created "Rural Black Studies" series for the U of Arkansas P.

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Ann Robinson has published in Atlanta Review, Amer- ican Literary Review, Connecticut Review, Interim, Jelly- bucket, Nimrod, Tampa Review, and Zone 3, among others. She studied under Miller Williams in the Uni- versity of Arkansas MFA program. Retired from the Marin Superior Courts, she owns a small farming op- eration with her sister in Arkansas, her native state. She travels between California and Arkansas several times a year.

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Essie Trice-Hewett is a retired educator, case manager, and service coordinator. She was instrumental in rec- ognition of her mother by Lee County in 2022 when they renamed the road by their homestead “Gertha Bailey Trice Road” in honor of her community activ- ism. Hewett and her siblings set up a scholarship at Lee Senior High School in honor of their mother. The scholarships are awarded to deserving students annually to attend their alma mater, the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff (UAPB). She holds a bachelor's degree from UAPB.

Lauri Umansky is Professor of History and Director of the Heritage Studies PhD Program at Arkansas State University. Her books include Motherhood Recon- ceived: Feminism and the Legacies of the Sixties, Naked Is the Best Disguise (pseud. Lauri Lewin), “Bad” Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America, Im- possible to Hold: Women and Culture in the 1960s, The New Disability History: American Perspectives, and others. Her latest book, Águila: The Vision, Life, Death, and Re- birth of a Two-Spirit Shaman in the Ozark Mountains, co- authored with María Cristina Moroles, will be published by U of Arkansas P in February 2024.

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