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*This Ain't Chicago: Race, Class, and Regional Identities
in the Post-Soul South* by Zandria F. Robinson (review)

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Book Reviews

Zandria F. Robinson, *This Ain't Chicago: Race, Class, and Regional Identities in the Post-Soul South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014. 238 pp. \$29.95.

This Ain't Chicago, the title of Zandria F. Robinson's new book, is the comment she heard again and again from longtime black Memphis residents. It was a statement about their identity as southerners, of their cultural distance from the urban North, and most specifically the distinction between themselves and the migration generations who headed to Chicago, Detroit, and other northern cities in the mid-twentieth century. Robinson's informants do not see themselves as part of a rural preindustrial South, the black southerners so fully described and later etched into cliché by ethnographer Howard Odum. Instead, twenty-first century black Memphis residents articulate a new "post-soul" southern identity, which Robinson calls "country cosmopolitan" (18). In this sharply analyzed, somewhat jargon-studded study, Robinson examines what it means to be a black southerner in a post-civil rights border city.

Robinson, a sociologist and Memphis native, brings place—in particular the American South—back to studies of African American identity. She explores how region shapes and intersects with the long-entrenched categories of race, class and gender. She interviewed 106 people, including longer and multiple interviews with thirty-two respondents. The interviewees range from postal workers to beauty shop owners, hip-hop artists, teachers and lawyers, and men and women of a variety of ages. All are African American, and most were second and third generation southerners, people with deep family roots in the South. With her interviews, Robinson seems particularly adept at analyzing shifts in tone and nuances in speech that reveal larger cultural attitudes. She also discusses popular culture—film and

music about the South—attempting to show that cultural representations reveal as much as they shape southern black identities. That part of the argument is less persuasive.

Robinson's informants see black southerners as "better" than northerners. Southern food, music, and friendliness are seen as the sources of an "authentic" black identity. Even southern racism can be framed in positive terms. Many respondents contend that southern racism, which they say is more virulent and overt than in the North, builds stronger character and a clearer sense of African American identity. Robinson is not searching for authenticity, but rather uncovering what her respondents understand as "authentic black identity." For those interviewed, region—a version of southernness—is central to African American identity.

Southernness proves a powerful force in reshaping black gender identities. Manhood and womanhood, so rigidly defined for white southerners, largely obscured the experiences of black men and women. African American women, for example, who were enslaved and forced into agricultural labor, or later, under Jim Crow, worked as house servants were defined out of a womanhood that confined women's work to the family home. Robinson's respondents appropriate and "perform" versions of standard white southern womanhood: the southern belle and steel magnolia. But at the same time, some respondents, including Robinson's mother, reject the identity of a "southern woman," claiming that it is so deeply suffused with whiteness that black women must construct alternative southern identities. "It is through gender that country cosmopolitanism enters terrain that resists the existing social order through strategic appropriation and performance" (123). How black women reappropriate southern womanhood reveals creativity, humor, and the mutability of gender identities.

Robinson is most insightful in considering how attitudes about race and gender have shifted across generations, especially in the move from the rural to the urban South. Memphis residents under forty talk about translating their parents' outright fear and resentment of whites to a "gentler" skepticism. "This willingness to give whites the benefit of the doubt" she writes, "is reflective of attempts to shed a 'Granddad' kind of countryness . . ." (104). Yet most continue to experience some form of racism almost daily. Even the upper-middle class professional who says he puts the racist "in the rear view mirror" admits that a white colleague stole his work and claimed a black man would be unfairly promoted.

What Robinson describes are new forms of racism and new strategies

for combating racist attitudes at work and in leisure, in a New South. If Memphis is any measure, America, clearly, has not reached a postracial age.

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Norbert Blei, *The Door Way: The People in the Landscape*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014 [Granite Falls, Minn.: Ellis Press, 1981]. 320 pp. \$18.00.

The resurgence of regionalism as a context for historical understanding and inquiry raises numerous challenges. Finding appropriate sources is essential for elucidating a location's historical past, especially if the geographic focus is intended to present a particular place as inherently significant in and of itself, as opposed to being merely a localized manifestation of a national or international development. *The Door Way* fills this need in the case of a quintessential Midwest location.

Door County, Wisconsin—or Door—located on a peninsula jutting into Lake Michigan, has had multiple identities. For decades, it has been one of the Upper Midwest's premier vacation destinations, especially but not exclusively for well-to-do Chicagoans. If nearby Wisconsin Dells was the region's lowbrow attraction, Door was the Riviera. It also attracted large numbers of bohemian residents, an eclectic array of writers, artists, counterculture enthusiasts, and other iconoclasts seeking an escape from some humdrum existence. Their presence added to Door's allure.

The Door Way is an impressionistic local history. The collection of essays by the late Norbert Blei, an "exile" from Chicago, captures the essence of the county's multiple identities. Vignettes describe both the place—defined by a nexus of land and water—and its well- and lesser-known inhabitants. Readers familiar with Door will recognize some of the personalities, such as Al Johnson, who is best known for the goats which inhabit the roof of his Swedish Restaurant in Sister Bay. Other characters may rekindle a personal memory (Gust Klenke was connected to the rental cabins to which my buddies and I retreated during graduate school.) In all cases, Blei provides a record of their existence.

Given the author's role as participant-observer, his stories also serve as primary sources, first person accounts of a well-known and regionally