

## Review

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Kim Lacy Rogers. *Life and Death in the Delta: African American Narratives of Violence, Resilience, and Social Change*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006. 214 pp. ISBN: 1-4039-6036-4.

In *Life and Death in the Delta: African American Narratives of Violence, Resilience and Social Change*, Kim Lacy Rogers explores the legacy of the “collective trauma” (13) that African Americans endured in the Mississippi Delta, concentrating on the period between the 1930s and 1990s. Rogers selected narrators from two distinct groups in the Delta region. In chapters one and two she writes about the life stories of those who grew up within sharecropping and tenant farming circumstances and who did not have means of acquiring property of their own and lived on the land of their employers. In chapters three through five Rogers explores the narratives of African Americans who had property of their own and thus experienced a measure of independence from their employers. In contrasting the life stories of the narrators from both groups Rogers’ goal is to identify “iconic narratives that were rooted in specific conditions and opportunities” (16). By contextualizing each narrator’s story within the general social conditions of the particular counties being studied, she links varying ideas of progress to economic opportunity and the opportunities for education available to each group. In exploring the roots of each group of narrators through their life stories Rogers connects economic stability and landownership, or the lack thereof, to how individuals were socialized within communities. With attention to this, she explores the ways in which narrators expressed disillusionment with their communities in the 1990s and attributed particular causes to the continued economic instability and social problems in the Delta region.

Rogers characterizes the movement of the 1960s among those from sharecropping families as an effort to break away from the oppressive conditions of segregation, to be free of the threat of violence and to be able to exercise their citizens’ rights such as the right to vote, and to break away from poverty. Narrators recalled the sacrifices their parents made to provide for their families as well as the importance their parents assigned to education in giving their children the means to become independent from the oppressive conditions of sharecropping. Despite this focus on education, many children of sharecroppers were unable to progress into higher grades because in segregated communities African American children were often prevented from attending high school. Some simply had to abandon education and instead contribute to their family’s income.

In the 1990s Rogers found that these narrators, recalling their involvement in the movement, seemed to doubt that the movement had changed the social conditions in the Delta as poverty, low rates of school attendance, and lack of employment opportunities still plagued their counties (70). They expressed “mourning” for the sense of community they felt had been essential to their survival, “and for the singleness of purpose that so many families shared about the value and transformative power of education” (69). In assigning cause to the continuing social and economic problems African Americans experienced, these narrators largely laid blame on the disintegration of the sense of community that African Americans had developed under segregation. Rogers identifies that these narrators felt that the enduring social and economic problems experienced in the Delta persisted because there was no longer the discipline, family values, work ethic, and sense of mutual responsibility that had contributed to their survival under segregation.

In chapters three through five, Rogers focuses on families who owned land. Narrators who had grown up in land-owning families often recalled their pasts “in terms of education, survival skills, and community serviced activism” (73). Landowning families were not faced with the same constant threats of violence that those from sharecropping families endured because their land and their communities provided them security. These narrators recalled hearing stories of African Americans who had gone missing or had to flee under the threat of violence which were similar to those sharecroppers had recalled; however, as Rogers explains, “narrators whose families owned land, or who lived in all black communities like Mound Bayou, often developed a sense of physical and psychological resilience to the hovering threat of white violence that so haunted the existence of the landless poor” (96). In these three chapters Rogers reveals stratifications among property owners that were not present within the seemingly homogeneous experience of sharecropping. In landowning families, “distinctions that emerged as critical in their life stories were produced by class and status differences that might appear invisible to outsiders of the community” (77). Among residents of counties where many African Americans owned land there existed divisions between African American working poor, middle class, and those who grew up in all-black communities.

Rogers argues that, for narrators from the middle class, the notion of progress was rooted in “economic development and opportunity, winning respect from the white community, and higher achievement in education and professional advancement” (75). For these narrators, individual achievements were related to a broader picture of social progress in the community. Having the benefit of high school and in some cases post-secondary education, middle class narrators viewed the problematic social conditions of the Delta through a wider lens than those who had not had the opportunity to continue with their education. Rogers found that

these middle-class narrators viewed the social conditions of the Delta region “within the seemingly contradictory context of national racial progress and continuing region-wide practices of racial oppression” and strove to change these conditions by taking on roles in community leadership (108). These narrators saw the Head Start program as a means of providing education to both poor children and their parents as well as employment, both of which would contribute to the overall improvement of their communities. They emphasized “survival, adaptation, and accomplishment in segregated and post-movement Mississippi,” and recognized “shifting racial constraints” (73). In the all-black community of Mound Bayou narrators retained a “nostalgic memory of secure, nurturing, supportive community devoted to education of the young” (116). Rather than memories of deprivation, these families recalled the importance of frugality and emphasized individual achievements in educational and economic stability as the path toward independence for their communities. Along with individual achievements, there was the emphasis on “general social achievement” (87).

Although narrators from the middle class attained higher education and greater economic security than their parents’ generation had and fostered opportunities for their own children’s advancement, Rogers explores the contradictions in the sense of achievement they felt in their own families’ successes. For example, narrators expressed pride in the achievements of their children who left the Delta region in pursuit of employment opportunities despite this being contradictory to feelings that community progress was directly related to individual achievement. Rogers notes that although narrators from the middle class understood that continuing regional economic underdevelopment contributed to the social problems of the Delta, they “wanted the lower classes to practice restraint and frugality and initiative,” but “also expressed anger and disappointment with the black middle class, with African American elected officials, and with the ambitious young people who continued to leave the region and state” (152). Rogers also found that those who had obtained positions of public office also projected the greatest sense of despair; although these narrators had been enthusiastic during the 1960s movement and had been “optimistic about erasing the legacies of paternalism and dependence,” they had eventually grown disillusioned in learning how deeply rooted the political and economic structures were that upheld this legacy (159).

Kim Lacy Rogers provides a detailed history of the Delta region, drawing connections between the past and present as remembered and observed by Delta activists and providing supplementary statistical data to place these narratives in the wider context of the Delta’s regional characteristics. As a result, she was able to identify silences in the narratives of property owners, in particular their failure to acknowledge the “danger and hunger that surrounded Mississippi African Americans that did not own property and did not reside in all black communities,”

or that the progress they achieved through education was not representative of the experiences of the vast majority of African Americans in the Delta (116).

Despite the class-based distinctions according to which Rogers divides the narratives, she draws attention to the sense of empowerment these narrators gained by having participated in a collective movement that brought positive social changes. Fitting with her aim of identifying the dualities in the stories of her narrators, the strength of *Life and Death in the Delta* is the poignancy of the contrast made between the sense of purpose narrators expressed in recalling their participation in the movement and the disillusionment they express when recalling that past in the 1990s. Despite achievements, both in individual lives and in communities in the rural Mississippi Delta, the sense of disillusionment and disempowerment felt in the midst of continued racial inequity, extreme poverty, and limited employment opportunities for African Americans overwhelmed any expressions of victory or achievement.

Consequently *Life and Death in the Delta* is as much about the 1990s as it is about the preceding decades. Rogers successfully weaves the decades between the 1930s and the 1990s together through the individual reasoning and social purpose expressed in the memories of her narrators. She uses individual life stories and personal perspectives of social change in the Delta through these years in order to highlight the complexities of the persistent economic and social problems in the rural Mississippi Delta, to connect this with the perspectives of those who contributed to the Civil Rights Movement in an effort to improve conditions in their communities.