

Lost Delta Found: Rediscovering the Fisk University-Library of Congress Coahoma County Study, 1942-1942, edited by Robert Gordon and Bruce Nemerov.

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Abstract:

Gordon and Nemerov contend that Lomax sought out vestiges of old-fashioned African American culture and turned away from documenting the full complexity of the contemporary Delta. [...] in *The Land Where the Blues Began*, Lomax laments that gospel music "threat-ens the continuance of the finest song genre of this and perhaps any continent, namely the black spiritual" (p. 48).

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Article:

Lost Delta Found: Rediscovering the Fisk University-Library of Congress Coahoma County Study, 1941-1942. Edited by Robert Gordon and Bruce Nemerov. (Nashville, Tenn.: Vanderbilt University Press, 2005. Pp. xiv, 343. \$29.95, ISBN 0-8265-1485-5.)

In 1941 and 1942 three African American scholars from Fisk University—John W. Work III, Lewis W. Jones, and Samuel C. Adams—collaborated with Alan Lomax of the Library of Congress on a field-recording project in Coahoma County, Mississippi. Until now, the only published account of these trips was Lomax's 1993 *The Land Where the Blues Began* (New York). The present book brings to light manuscripts that Work, Jones, and Adams wrote in the 1940s about the project.

Comparing these scholars' analyses to Lomax's account a half-century later is like juxtaposing a lab report and a romance novel. Both have something to teach us. Into this already charged juxtaposition, editors Robert Gordon and Bruce Nemerov introduce a third genre—the mystery. Their implication that Lomax perpetrated academic misdeeds against his collaborators adds loose speculation to a tale plenty interesting on its own.

Lost Delta Found: Rediscovering the Fisk University-Library of Congress Coahoma County Study, 1941-1942 consists of essays by sociologists Jones and Adams and musicologist Work, with introductory materials by Gordon and Nemerov. Nearly a third of the volume consists of Work's transcriptions of the songs recorded during the trips. The Fisk scholars' essays reveal a region lurching into the twentieth century as new technologies—the highway, the radio, the jukebox—break down insular rural life.

Lost Delta Found gets its energy from the assertion that Adams, Jones, and Work had a clearer vision of southern life than their better known collaborator, Lomax. Gordon and Nemerov contend that Lomax sought out vestiges of old-fashioned African American culture and turned away from documenting the full complexity of the contemporary Delta. They argue that in "focusing on the uneducated artists over more educated spokespeople, [and] by favoring 'tradition' . . . over an authentic presentation. . . . Lomax creates an appealing but static and nostalgic portrait of black Southern America" (p. 25). Indeed, in *The Land Where the Blues Began*, Lomax laments that gospel music "threatens the continuance of the finest song genre of this and perhaps any continent, namely the black spiritual" (p. 48). Work, by contrast, calmly notes that "[t]he fading-out of the spirituals from an active place in the folk-church, deplorable as it might be to the rest of the country, is simply explained. They are being displaced by types of songs which perform their functions more satisfactorily and more easily" (p. 58).

Does the fact that Lomax "went out of his way" to collect spirituals suggest that his "prejudices 'cooked the data,'" as Gordon and Nemerov assert (p. 52)? Or did Lomax just have a different agenda for the Coahoma project? Lomax was not a social scientist trying to gather a representative sample of extant culture; he was a memory worker telling a story about America's heritage. He knew that spirituals were being displaced, but he saw them as examples of African American creativity to be preserved and exalted long into the future.

Gordon and Nemerov are right that Lomax's missionary zeal caused him to soar past inconvenient obstacles, including scientific conceptions of data and, often, the practice of collegial collaboration. The editors accuse Lomax of slighting the contributions of his partners. "This was no pretty picture of institutional cooperation," write Gordon and Nemerov; "instead, there was name-calling, hostility, deception . . ." (p. xv). Indeed, although Jones is a key character in *Land Where the Blues Began*, Work and Adams are little more than footnotes. The editors quote 1940s-era correspondence showing that Lomax treated them as such in life, too. "Lomax was responsible for a lot of great work," they write, "but he did not work alone" (p. xvi).

This sense of grievance and, perhaps, a sense of drama may have contributed to the editors' decision to introduce a subtext to this story: the notion that these manuscripts were "lost" and the implication that Lomax may have hidden them from public view (p. 27). The editors note that they found Jones's and Work's manuscripts "stashed in the back of a file-cabinet drawer in the Alan Lomax Archive at Hunter College in New York" with a "cover identifying it as a product of, and the property of, the Social Sciences Institute at Fisk University" (p. 29). A copy of

Adams's manuscript "was discovered strewn about the floor and cabinets" of the archive (p. 223). "That the manuscripts were found in the Lomax archives six decades after they went missing," the editors note archly, "may reveal much about how research is, and is not, shared, attributed, and published" (p. 27).

This whiff of mystery feels overblown. There is no indication that Lomax held the sole copies of the manuscripts or that he discouraged the other authors from publishing. The editors discovered Adams's material on the floor of the Lomax Archive, but "[t]he original manuscript turned up at Fisk a couple years later, and their complete copy is the source for this chapter" (p. 223). Work's manuscript also turned up on microfilm in the Fisk Library's Special Collections (p. 26). Did Lomax purposely stash the materials away, or did he simply not give a second thought to his erstwhile collaborators?

Even if the Delta manuscripts may not have been as "lost" as the editors suggest, Gordon and Nemerov deserve our gratitude for shepherding the elegant findings of Work, Jones, and Adams to publication. They have amplified voices from the past that heretofore were too faint for us to hear. If the new narrators do not fully supplant the old, they do remind us that America's tale needs multiple storytellers.