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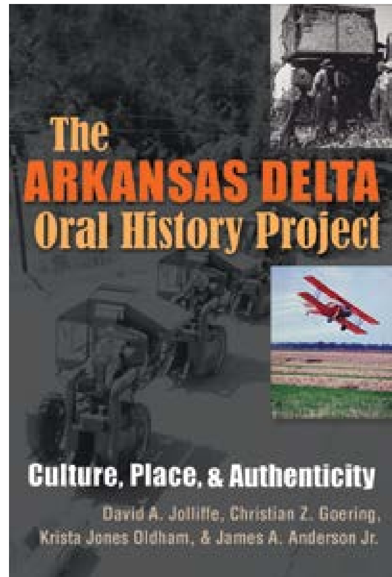
The Arkansas Delta Oral History Project: Culture, Place, and Authenticity

David A. Jolliffe, Christine Z. Goering, Krista Jones Oldham, and James A. Anderson Jr.
Syracuse UP, 2016, pp. 272.



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One of the first things readers will notice when reading *The Arkansas Delta Oral History Project: Culture, Place, and Authenticity* is that most of it is written in the past tense. Launched in the spring of 2007, the five-year-long Arkansas Delta Oral History Project (ADOHP), a community literacy partnership between the University of Arkansas and rural community high schools in the Arkansas Delta, is now complete. Jolliffe et al.'s volume serves as both critical reflection of the ADOHP and jumping off point for a new community literacy project called the Students Involved in Sustaining Their Arkansas (SISTA), which began in fall 2015. Even though the ADOHP is now over, readers will be interested in the way this particular university-community partnership took shape, what flaws the authors see in the original iteration of the project, and what enduring legacy exists because of the ADOHP's strengths.

The ADOHP's origins begin when David Jolliffe, after stepping into the role of endowed Brown Chair at the University of Arkansas, spent a year traveling the state learning about the particular intersection between economic decline and literacy in the Delta. What he found was a vast regional community victimized by the major economic shifts of globalization, mechanization, and agribusiness and haunted by a racist history that still influences race relations. Jolliffe also found an education system that—like many other communities in the United States—relies heavily on teach-to-the test pedagogies. In the opening pages of the first chapter, Jolliffe explains that part of his vision as Brown Chair was to contribute to the University of Arkansas's initiative to diversify its student body by forming a positive relationship between the largely white and economically privileged university in Fayetteville and the primarily African American students in the Delta, a relationship that didn't exist before the ADOHP began. At the same time, he hoped to help revitalize Delta communities with literacy in context. He used the Brown Chair's endowment to hire co-directors and to

begin forming partnerships with Delta high school teachers and principals. The basic premise of the ADOHP was to challenge participating high school teachers to use oral history as a teaching tool to augment part of their already-planned curriculum, no matter the course they were teaching.

Jolliffe and his co-authors sought to bring literacy to life for high school students and to entrust them with the power to "invigorate, revitalize, and generally improve the quality of life in their hometowns and regions" (7). The ADOHP consisted of partnerships with five different high school classes (of varying subjects) in five Delta high schools and a university undergraduate course. The seventeen university students in this course were mostly honors students in English, history, and anthropology and as part of the curriculum, they acted as mentors to high school participants while completing the same oral history project as their mentees. High school students and their university student-mentors determined a relevant local topic of interest; went into their own community to interview residents about their topic; transcribed their interviews; and finally—and arguably the most intriguing part of the ADOHP—transformed those transcripts into meaningful literacy experiences of their own design. Among other genres, students performed poems, staged plays, and crafted podcasts, all of which were showcased at an end-of-year celebration bringing historical and cultural issues of the Delta to life for an audience.

The scale and scope of the ADOHP is impressive and almost too vast to fit into a single book, which may cause some stumbling points for readers. For instance, apart from David Jolliffe who is a defining presence throughout the text, it is frequently difficult to discern what roles the co-authors play in both the project and the book. The authors seem to be aware of this issue, as they spend a brief paragraph in the first chapter explaining that the text's "we" refers to not only the co-authors but also other ADOHP organizers who happen not to be authors (7). This general "we" and subsequent confusion for readers can be expected in a project with as many moving parts as the ADOHP, but it is also something for other community literacy scholars to consider when writing about their own outreach programs. Further explanation of author roles could better inform readers who hope to grow similar projects in their own communities. Regardless of this confusion, the authors of *The Arkansas Delta Oral History Project* craft a compelling tale of important outreach and student-choice driven literacy-in-context that is honest about its shortcomings while calling on readers to learn from and with their communities and to put students' literacies to use in revitalizing their hometowns.

The authors split the book into two parts: "Foundations" and "Representations." "Foundations," handles the logistical beginnings of the ADOHP and its theoretical underpinnings, while "Representations" focuses on student work and the ADOHP's legacy beyond its five-year tenure. The first chapter, "Origins, Pedagogy, Potholes, and Fixes," captures the guidebook quality of a community outreach project, describing for the reader important contextual history of the Delta's economic, cultural, and racial history alongside the program's inception and original design. The authors' methodological transparency can be helpful for readers hoping to implement similar university-community partnerships. For example, a major component of the ADOHP

partnered a university student in the ADOHP university course with a group of five high school students from different high schools in the Delta. These student groups interacted online while moving through the different stages of the oral history assignment but also met in person three times. The authors confess they didn't foresee that university and high school students would have such a difficult time engaging with one another due to academic, cultural, socio-economic, regional, and racial differences. As the authors poignantly state, The University of Arkansas is "literally five hours but figuratively a lifetime away from most of the high school students who participated in the ADOHP" (8). To alleviate tensions caused by these visceral differences, ADOHP organizers implemented more direct instruction for how in-person and online meetings should proceed and introduced texts in the university classroom that could help student-mentors critically contextualize the Delta high school students' experiences with education and poverty. The authors honestly grapple with the disconnect between theory and practice that characterizes most any community outreach or service learning project and how organizers can navigate and learn from those disconnects pedagogically.

The second chapter, "Theories: Consulted, Combined, Expected, Unexpected" places the ADOHP in the theoretical landscape of youth cultural studies, authentic intellectual student engagement, place-based critical pedagogies, and epideictic rhetorical theory. In this unique intersection of scholarship, the authors argue that students should have the opportunity to write themselves into the social fabric of their communities, to construct knowledge rather than merely report it, and to take on a revitalizing role in their communities through literacy. Through this argument, this volume contributes to the conversations in the field on literacy and rural sustainability, but rather than seeing literacy as the key to economic development in rural communities, the authors argue that literacy can be used to celebrate and honor the past in ways that help young people see the value in imagining sustainable futures for their hometowns.

The theoretical framework set up in chapter two comes alive in the second part of the book, "Representations," as readers access student work in three themed chapters on religion, food, and race. These themed chapters consist of author-written historical and cultural contextualization alongside vast amounts of student work, including full lists of students' interview questions, portions of interview transcripts, and sometimes even complete manuscripts of final projects. These reproductions of student work allow readers an inside look into the world of the ADOHP, to see theories in practice, and to gain insight into how both students and communities can benefit from, what the authors call, literacy in context and authentic intellectual work.

Chapter three, "The Church and Religion: Forces for Reinhabitation in the Delta" highlights student projects that grapple with the role church and religion play in the Delta's political and cultural environment. One student investigated the history of why there are two churches—a white and a black one—in her hometown. She then transformed her interviews with the black church's leaders into a slam poetry performance that divulged the two churches' complex relationship both historically and contemporarily. In this piece of poetry, it is clear the student wants to understand her

church community's complex and racialized past while also understanding the vital role the black church, in particular, plays in keeping her home community strong. As the authors argue, her project uses literacy and "contributes her part to the ongoing discourse about how to keep [towns like hers] viable and sustainable" (111).

The authors contend that giving students the choice to conduct critical explorations of everyday local topics of interest, like religion, can help students construct a productive discourse about their hometowns. Such authentic intellectual work helps to counteract the dominant narrative of decline that surrounds rural communities such as those in the Arkansas Delta. A discourse of decline helps constitute the "subject positions and roles" citizens of these communities can fill, roles which, "allow them to act in certain ways in relation to economic and political realities and, concurrently, that deny them other options" (75). The ADOHP hoped to develop an alternative discourse, one that drew heavily on nostalgia and epideictic rhetoric. While the authors express wariness about the risk of overly praising the past, they forward the transformative power of nostalgia-tinged rhetoric in most of the students' projects. Students' oral history projects, such as the one described above, often enacted a form of epideictic rhetoric to praise their community's pasts in order to imagine the ways the past can help sustain their communities' futures.

This reliance on epideictic rhetoric is evident in all chapters focused on student work but is most visible in chapter four, "Food and Foodways: Traditions Worth Saving and Reliving." Student projects in this chapter exhibit "the role that food has played in the Delta to bring disparate ethnic groups together, to gather folks from the working classes for social solidarity, to strengthen family bonds, and to connect families to their churches" (138). By critically examining the role of food in their communities, students determine values worth saving. In examining and praising these values, they can harness epideictic rhetoric to work directly against the narrative of decline that surrounds them. As one university student who interviewed the owner of a barbeque place in her hometown put it, "we shouldn't overlook the seriousness of the actual contemporary reality, but there are things coming out of the Delta that are worth remembering" (141).

Chapter five, "Race, Resistance, and Schooling in the Heart of the Delta" moves away from nostalgia to look at the history of racial tensions in the area as something "to be kept alive, but certainly not revered" (168). Again, highlighting the importance of student choice, the authors point out that in a state-mandated curriculum that prioritizes standardized testing over local experiences, students rarely get the opportunity to think and talk about race, even in a state that is so predominately featured in the history of federally mandated desegregation. The ADOHP encouraged students to write themselves into the complex racialized history that continues to define the Delta. After all, the majority of the ADOHP's high school participants were black students since most white students attend private schools that arose after forced integration. The authors question the partiality of only learning black students' perspectives but also highlight the importance of partnerships like the ADOHP in rural communities with racialized pasts. Students were able to look at their hometown's relationship to desegregation—and to black resistance to segregation and white response—as they

sometimes even interviewed their own teachers as eyewitnesses to a very recent and tangible history.

The ADOHP's effects continue to reverberate in new projects and in the connections made between people—between students and their hometowns and between the university and the Delta communities. The authors conclude in the final chapter "Toward Rural Sustainability: Outgrowth and Extensions" by describing projects that have emerged in the spirit of the ADOHP, calling upon the original project's hallmarks: "youths inscribing themselves in the social texts of a salient topic in their culture, deploying the resources of place in their learning, and accomplishing authentic intellectual work" (210). The ADOHP organizers have moved away from the epideictic rhetoric—citing it as becoming more and more uncritical throughout the ADOHP's tenure—in favor of a new project (SISTA) that calls upon students to take a more active role in sustainable futures. However, the authors stand by the original intents of the ADOHP. They ultimately challenge readers to use community partnerships to resist dominant narratives of decline by looking at the ways literacy can support rural sustainability. They ask readers to start a dialogue with their communities—rural or otherwise—to begin creating authentic, place-based literacy experiences with students in ways that can help "bridge the gap" between communities and schools (224).