HYPERALLERGIC

March 9, 2019

A Love Note to the Quirky South

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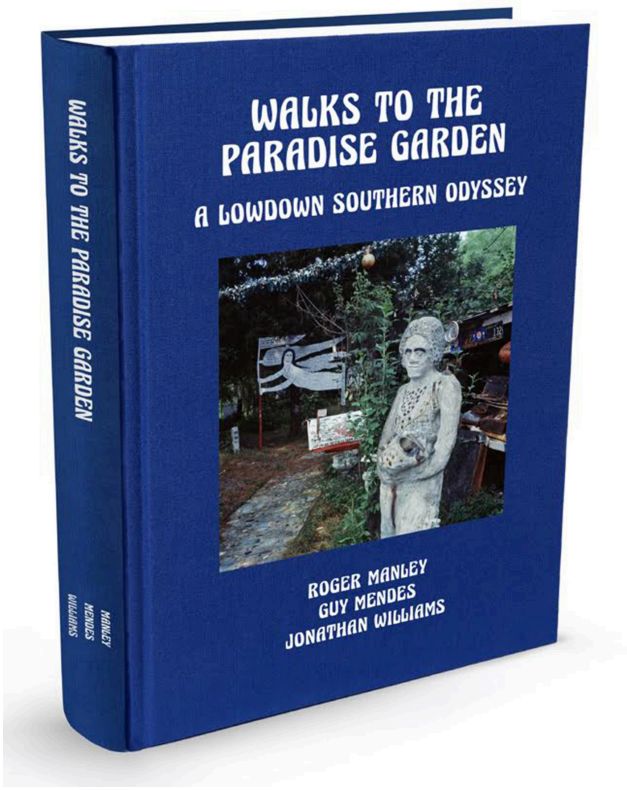
Fortune-cookie wisdom holds that even the longest journey begins with the first step.

So much for the ardor, or stamina, that ambitious trekking demands. But when it comes to documenting the impressions and discoveries of the most memorable expeditions, what valuable observational tools — along with good maps, notebooks, cameras, and trail mix — should attentive travelers be sure to pack?

Answers to that question may be found in works like the 17th-century Japanese poet Matsuo Bashō's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, or Patrick Leigh Fermor's vivid evocation of the late-colonial-era Caribbean, *The Traveller's Tree* (1950), or the detail-packed, place-savoring essays of his Welsh-born, contemporary counterpart, Jan Morris.

Guy Mendes, "Martha Nelson Thomas with Her Doll Babies, Louisville, Kentucky" (1989) (© 2019 Guy Mendes, photo courtesy Institute 193)



Walks to the Paradise Gardens, published by Institute 193, Lexington, Kentucky

Now, with *Walks to the Paradise Garden: A Lowdown Southern Odyssey*, the travel bookshelf gains another volume that is sure to become an instant classic in its field. Some three decades in the making and newly published by Institute 193, an independent arts center in Lexington, Kentucky, whose programming focuses on contemporary cultural expressions from the American South, *Walks to the Paradise Garden* is a peculiarly charming, richly atmospheric, often goofy ramble of a book that looks back at one of the most history-laden regions in the United States just as the particular slice of cultural life it examines was already beginning to fade, and for some observers, becoming the stuff of legend.

“This is a book about a region of colorful characters, written by one of its most colorful characters,” Phillip March Jones, the new volume’s editor, told me during a recent interview at his home in downtown Manhattan. A decade ago, Jones, who grew up in Lexington and is deeply rooted in — and an attentive observer of — the social-cultural rhythms of his native part of the country, founded Institute 193 to create a framework for presenting the work and ideas of both schooled and untrained artists, musicians, storytellers, and other creative types in a welcoming, respectful, visible manner. Last fall, in the East Village, he established Institute 193 (1B), an annex of the main Lexington venue, which collaborates with various institutions in the South to present exhibitions and events in New York. More recently, he co-curated the 2019 Atlanta Biennial, which is now on view at Atlanta Contemporary, an arts center, through April 7.

Jones was referring to the North Carolina-born poet Jonathan Williams (1929-2008), the author of the diaristic-reportorial texts that form the main part of *Walks to the Paradise Garden*. Williams also recorded the various bon mots that are sprinkled throughout its pages, capturing nuggets of Southern wit, like the warning of a yard sign in Mississippi (“Television is a tunnel of lightning from Hell”) or the temptations of a bait-shop sign in Georgia, announcing, “Spring lizards, Polish sausage.”

Guy Mendes, “Royal Robertson’s Signage, Baldwin, Louisiana” (1986) (© 2019 Guy Mendes, photo courtesy Institute 193)

Roger Manley, “Zebedee Armstrong, Thomson, Georgia” (1987) (© 2019 Roger Manley, photo courtesy Institute 193)

Williams, who had studied at and dropped out of Princeton University, later attended the Chicago Institute of Design and, in his native region of western North Carolina, what would become the legendary Black Mountain College. Over time, that progressive school, founded in the 1930s, would attract as teachers or students such later-recognized, iconic modernists as Josef and Anni Albers, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Robert Rauschenberg, Buckminster Fuller, Ruth Asawa, and Ray Johnson.

In 1951, Williams, who was interested in folk art, avant-garde verse, and the culture of his native Appalachia, co-founded the Jargon Society, a small press that promoted the work of the so-called Black Mountain Poets. Among others, they included Charles Olson, Denise Levertov, and Robert Creeley. One of the small outfit’s most successful titles was Ernest Matthew Mickler’s *White Trash Cooking* (1986), a book of recipes; it became the go-to authority on such gastronomic marvels as Mock-Cooter Stew, Oven-Baked Possum, and Irma Lee Stratton’s Don’t-Miss Chocolate Dump Cake.

As Jones explains in his introduction to *WTPG*, in the early 1980s, Williams began making road trips throughout the South, often accompanied by his photographer friends, Guy Mendes, a New Orleans native who had studied writing in Kentucky with Wendell Berry and Guy Davenport, and Roger Manley, a folklorist who is known today as the director of the Gregg Museum of Art & Design at North Carolina State University in Raleigh.

Mendes and Manley caught on film the quirky sights and strangely enticing atmospheres the poet described in his notebooks. They trekked through North Carolina, Kentucky, Georgia, Mississippi, and elsewhere, stopping in small towns and meeting local eccentrics. Often, the name of a place — “Erect,” “Whynot,” “Climax” — or a hand-lettered store sign advertising “Ice, Pop, Ammo” was enough of an invitation for them to stop and “set a spell.” (The book’s title comes from Howard Finster’s “Paradise Garden,” a two-and-a-half-acre, outdoor-art environment the Baptist preacher and self-styled visionary created over many years in Summerville, in northwestern Georgia.)

By the early 1990s, Williams, Mendes, and Manley were eager to publish a photo-illustrated record of their journeys, but a book never emerged out of the material they had loosely assembled. Finally, as Jones recalls in his introduction to the new volume, a few years ago, “Mendes pulled [a manuscript] down from a shelf in his studio and said to me, ‘We should publish this someday.’” It was dauntingly indecipherable, but for reference, they also had a document Williams had left behind after his death,

titled “AN APPROXIMATE TABLE OF CONTENTS FOR WALKS TO THE PARADISE GARDEN.” It served Jones, Mendes, and Manley as a guide to structuring the book the late poet had envisaged.

As Jones retyped Williams’ original texts, the two photographers combed through their archives in search of the hundreds of road-trip photos they had shot decades earlier. Jones points out that the book reflects the spirit of a time (from 1983 through 1992) in which its authors easily rolled into small towns and got to know strangers, who introduced them to the really interesting characters they thought their visitors should discover.

Roger Manley, “Howard Finster’s Paradise Garden, Summerville, Georgia” (1987–88) (© 2019 Roger Manley, photo courtesy Institute 193)

Aficionados of outsider art in the US may recognize in *WTPG* the air of a now-vanished moment, when rambling travelers could casually track down someone like Finster or, in Alabama, the late Mose Tolliver, and purchase paintings directly from them. Those artists might now be deceased, but as Jones notes, many of their works have been preserved by museums, and their accomplishments have earned both commercial and critical recognition.

In fact, coinciding with the publication of *WTPG*, the High Museum of Art in Atlanta is presenting, through May 19, *Way Out There: The Art of Southern Backroads*, an exhibition bringing together photographs by Mendes and Manley from their travels with Williams, as well as works from the museum’s collection made by several of the artists who are featured in the book. Among them: Tolliver; Mary T. Smith; “Prophet” Royal Robertson; and Eddie Owens Martin (“St. EOM”), the creator of the mystical Pasaquan art environment in western Georgia.

Roger Manley, “Jolly Joshua Samuel’s Can City, Walterboro, South Carolina” (1981) (© 2019 Roger Manley, photo courtesy Institute 193)

The book itself is both a substantive document and, in our no-attention-span Instagram era, a surprisingly performative one, too. Williams’ language makes each entry a tease. As a prospector with a keen eye and a storyteller itching to please, he seemed determined to dig up something new with each encounter, from Mirell Lainhart’s dot-covered house in Jackson County, Kentucky (“Ever see a spotted house? Well. I’ve got one!”) to Jolly Joshua Samuel’s “Can City,” in South Carolina — yes, a vast, outdoor expanse decorated with empty metal cans.

About his visit to the black preacher John D. Ruth’s “Drive-through Bible Park” near Woodville, Georgia, Williams recalls, “A lot of times when you visit Reverend Ruth, you’ll hear him in the back of the house playing on the only electric organ that isn’t busted. His wife, wearing ‘curious’ make-up, accompanies him in singing ‘Little Baby.’”

In Russellville, Kentucky, he examined large figures sculpted with a chainsaw from oak trees — “Big Man” and “Big Woman” — on the lawn of their creator, a retired carpenter, Austin Coe. Williams dutifully noted, “The Big Woman was nekkit, until a pious neighbor complained (‘She was just jealous of them big titties,’ confides Mr. Coe). So he put a skirt and a bra on her. Big Man is modest with pants on.”

Williams takes in Elvis Presley’s Graceland estate in Memphis (“it’s as tacky as one could hope for and only demonic pointy-headed intellectuals and lovers of art like ourselves would quarrel with any of it”), meets the Fabulous Go-Go Girls of Boot’s Bar in Lexington, and, also in Kentucky, learns about Martha Nelson, the inventor of hand-made, dimple-faced fabric dolls, each of which she had

been selling along with its own "birth certificate." (As Nelson's cute creations became known, certain entrepreneurs unfairly exploited her designs.)

Roger Manley, "Georgia Blizzard, Glade Spring, Virginia" (1985), © 2019 Roger Manley, photo courtesy of Institute 193

In New Orleans, he spots a bumper sticker that warns, "If you don't like my driving, dial 1-800-EAT-SHIT." The frisson of hostility proffered by that message hints at an aspect of the broader subject of this book — the social and cultural attitudes and atmosphere of the American South, whose collective character, as anyone who has studied the troubled past of the region is aware, sometimes harbors a dark, disturbing, even sinister side.

It evokes that inescapable part of the region's history — a legacy rooted in anti-intellectualism, xenophobia, stubborn religiosity, and, of course, ugly, institutionalized racism, expressed in a poisonous mix of ignorance and fear — that has caused indelible pain over many generations, a kind of lasting damage to the human soul that no amount of feel-good, anecdotal jottings will ever mitigate. (The durability among many white Southerners of these seemingly unshakable trends proudly helped empower Trump.)

Still, Williams, who was gay and who, later in life, divided his time between the US and England, thereby gaining a broader, personal perspective on the world, was too much of a humanist not to sense the tension and pain that nourished the soil of the region that for so long had seized his imagination.

In this new, posthumously published book, he writes:

> *Walks to the Paradise Garden* could have been called what Guy Mendes wanted for a title: *Way Out People Way Out There*. But, as a survivor from the Days of Highbrow Culture, I liked the deeper resonance of my choice. For one thing, many of the people in this book are directly involved with making paradise for themselves in the front yard, the back garden, the parlor, the sun porch, the basement. Making things for them has been a way to salvage a little dignity from often poor and difficult lives. Salvation can come, on one level, from being paid attention to and being recognized.

And as any experienced adventurer knows, the first step on a journey heading in that direction is a first step on the path toward a very special destination — redemption.

Walks to the Paradise Garden: A Lowdown Southern Odyssey (2019)*, by Roger Manley, Guy Mendes, and Jonathan Williams, and edited by Phillip March Jones, is published by Institute 193. It is available from Institute 193 and other online retailers.*