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## Mooney Award Committee Report

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## Mooney Award Committee Reviews

The 2001 James Mooney Award Committee reviewed ten books submitted by six university presses. As we made our final evaluations we soon reached a consensus that two of the ten books were superior in meeting the criteria for the Mooney Award. These books were: *Creating Freedom: Material Culture and African American Identity at Oakley Plantation, Louisiana, 1840-1950* by Laurie Wilkie; and *The Estuary's Gift: An Atlantic Coast Biography* by David Griffith.

Both Wilkie and Griffith were present at the 2002 annual meeting where, in a public ceremony, they each received a certificate of recognition from the Mooney Committee and a monetary gift from SAS. Wilkie received the 2001 James Mooney Award and Griffith received the 2001 James Mooney Honorable Mention Award. Following are reviews of the winning books by two members of the 2001 Mooney Award Committee. (Introduction by Harry Lefever, Committee Chair.)

Wilkie, Laurie

**2000** *Creating Freedom: Material Culture and African American Identity at Oakley Plantation, Louisiana, 1840-1950*. Louisiana State University Press. 248 pages, 9 maps, 47 figures, 24 tables, appendix, references cited, index.

Reviewed by Hester A. Davis  
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There have certainly been many books written on antebellum/postbellum plantation life in the South, some vastly romanticized, some “first hand” from diaries, some biased—but almost all (until recently) from the viewpoint of the white owners. Historic archeologists are trying to broaden and deepen, if you will, the story of plantation life by excavating at the sites representing the silent majority of these Southern communities, the African Americans who made the white planters way of life possible.

Oakley Plantation is well known in the Lower Mississippi Valley, an area where, actually, several plantation houses survive, mostly as reconstructed tourist attractions, and Oakley is one of these. The last of the original “planter” family died in the mid-1940s and the State of Louisiana acquired the property in 1947 as a part of the Audubon State

Commemorative Area. The Great House does not have the traditional two-story white columns, but the ground-floor rooms are overshadowed by a wide long stair and the veranda. The planters living quarters were on the second and third stories. In addition to this extant building, a few outbuildings remain, but none of the less substantial houses of the African Americans (there were some 200 slaves on the plantation prior to the Civil War) survive. Documents on the plantation, however, do survive, a wealth of them in fact, back to the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Laurie Wilkie excavated the remains of four African American households, families associated with the owners as servants or laborers. Because of the wealth of documents, including the WPA ex-slave interviews in the early 1940s, Wilkie was able to put names to all those who lived in these houses; in addition, she was able to conduct oral interviews with a few people who had lived on the plantation in the 1920s and 30s. Her goal, as the title implies, was to use all these sources—the material objects recovered in the excavation, the living memory of individuals, the wills, diaries, and other legal and historical documents dealing directly with Oakley—to provide an “identity” for these African Americans’ families, not as individuals, but as a microcosm, a community, if you will, that is not reflected in any other single source. She achieved this goal using an over-arching theoretical approach—the concept of *habitus*

(Bourdieu 1977, 1990)—and by integrating her historic, ethnohistoric, and archeological interpretations.

After setting the stage with the historic background of ante- and postbellum South, and of the historic and social context of Oakley Plantation itself, there is a detailed chapter on the archeological excavations and the material culture recovered. Chapter 5 sets another stage, this one entitled “Conflicting Influences on Identity Construction: African Heritage and Planter Imposition.” Then comes the meat of her work in four chapters: “Creating Household Identities;” “Constructing Personal and Family Ritual;” “Creating Public Personas;” and finally, “Constructing African American Identities.” Wilkie writes well, her deductions seem fine-grained and well argued, and there is a LOT of information in this book—on magic and hoodoo, on the role of African American churches in educating the children, on ethnomedical practices, on the wide-spread barter

system in the South after the Civil War, for example. There is a certain amount of what I have heard called “creeping concretism” in her interpretations; suggestions made for the possible meaning of information in the documents or in the archeological record which become fact in the summary. There is a certain amount of jargon (“communication-related artifacts” are inkwells, pen nibs, ends of pencil erasers), but this is not a book for the general public. This IS a book for professors to use for supplemental reading—in classes in Historic Archeology or in History of the South, for starters. It well deserves the Mooney Award.

#### References

- Bourdieu, Pierre  
 1977 *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge UK  
 1990 *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA.

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Griffith, David  
 1999 *The Estuary's Gift: An Atlantic Coast Cultural Biography*. University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Review by Helen Regis  
 Mooney Award Committee  
 Louisiana State University

David Griffith's at times, poetic, humorous, and passionate prose, draws us into the life history of the Atlantic coast, recounting the human drama of settlement, conquest, resistance, enslavement, migration, racism and struggle for freedom which took place on its shores. Beginning with the first Native American inhabitants and working through the arrival of Europeans, Africans, and recent Central American and Caribbean migrants, Griffith's is a profoundly historicized and dialectical account of changing parameters of gift exchange between human populations and the natural world, culminating in the

current crisis of the Atlantic coast's estuaries. He shows us how changes in complex relations of reciprocity between people and their environment and with each other, can become unbalanced, making way for abuses of power, exploitation, and silencing of the oppressed. Through engagement with ecological theory, political economy, critical ethnohistory, and making deft use of Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and a Foucaultian analysis of power/knowledge relations, he lays out a critical, bottom-up history of a beautiful place haunted by a history of violence and threatened by monolithic capital-expansion and development.

In Griffith's ethnohistory of the Atlantic coast, privatization of public space, globalization, transnational labor flows, racialized oppression all interact in this lyrical ethnography of a fragmented landscape. Intimate portraits of coastal fishers, labor contractors, and Mexican crab pickers alternative

with subtle analysis of social settings, and clear-minded expose of dysfunctional government agencies working at cross-purposes with one another. Among the strongest ethnographic material is Griffith's rendering of the tortured itineraries of H-2 visa migrants, many of them young women seeking to better their lives in circumstances ripe for exploitation. Among the central questions asked by the author: What prevents fishers from organizing effectively across boundaries of place, gender, and ethnicity to save a common value, the estuaries from which they make their living? As fishers strive to maintain their autonomy (their "belligerent independence") in the face of monopolistic tendencies and vertical integration of the harvesting-processing-marketing sectors of the fishing industry, they also face the government agencies reliance of expert knowledge of scientists and dismissal of the intimate experiential knowledge of the fishers whose observations are based on working with natural resources, though they may not have the language to express

their knowledge in authoritative terms.

The author's political engagement is neither concealed nor un-grounded, inviting readers to enter into a humanistic, socially engaged, cultural, political, and aesthetic narrative, which is also a plea for the recognition of the commercial fisher's role in maintaining an profoundly diverse biological and cultural landscape. Griffith's essay demonstrates the social relevance of theory and the practical relevance of ethnographic knowledge. At the same time, it is so well written that it remains accessible to a general readership, and as such, could work well in broad variety of courses as an introduction to the ethnography of complex societies. Contrary to the discourse of the recreational fishing industry, which claims for itself the moral high ground in ecological debates, Griffith argues it is the commercial fishers who are our best hope for the survival of a diversified coast. In a phrase that embodies the culmination of the book-length essay, Griffith warns "they are the estuary's gift to us."