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## **Delta Dogs by Maude Schuyler Clay (review)**

Billy Middleton

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REVIEW

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

**Reviewed by:**

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*Billy Middleton (bio)*

*Delta Dogs*. Maude Schuyler Clay. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2014. Pp. 96.  
\$35.00 (cloth). ISBN: 978-1628460087.

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When I was in my early twenties, I spent several years teaching in the

Mississippi Delta. Now, living on the outskirts of New York City, I sometimes pine for the Delta's muddy fields, tumble-down buildings, and crumbling highways. Mississippi photographer Maude Schuyler Clay's new collection of photography, *Delta Dogs*, sparks in me this nostalgic longing for the region's ugly splendor. In her afterword, Schuyler Clay states that the focus of this collection is the Delta's "indigenous canine presence" (93), but even if the dogs are ostensibly the subjects of these photos, the real focus is often on the extreme squalor that surrounds them, the sense of a region stuck in the past, and the odd sense of freedom that comes with inhabiting a place the rest of the world has forgotten. This is not to say that the dogs in these images are less important than their surroundings: we envy their blithe indifference to the poverty, and perhaps we even strive to see this landscape through their eyes, to appreciate more fully the strange allure of its desolation. These dogs seem more fully connected to their landscape than we ever could, and this is the true appeal of the images in this collection. The viewer gets to see the Mississippi Delta from a new perspective, that of its four-legged inhabitants.

The most memorable photographs in this collection are those that reveal the unique and often idiosyncratic character of the Mississippi Delta. In *Fence Dog*, *Preston's House*, *Tutwiler*, a friendly-looking collie stands in a fenced-in dirt yard. In the background are a pair of cars: one is a standard late-seventies model town car, the other is decked out with dozens of air horns, dangling chains, numerous charms and metal knickknacks, turning it into a weird piece of folk art. Only as an afterthought does the viewer notice another dog, a German shepherd, enclosed in a wire pin between the two cars, his posture that of a dangerous semi-feral animal. With its blending of hominess, peculiarity, and danger, this image feels strongly characteristic of the Mississippi Delta. *Bank Dogs*, *Rosedale* portrays another distinctly Delta scene, in which two stray dogs, one of which looks like he might be part coyote, lounge on an empty, crumbling sidewalk in front of the Valley Bank, which may or may not be abandoned; it's hard to tell from the photo. In many of these pictures, the dog is hardly visible at all, overshadowed by the

quirks of the Delta itself. One might easily overlook the dog lounging in the shadows of the porch in *Skeleton Dog, the McMullen Place, Sumner*, which depicts one of the Delta's many ramshackle sharecropper shacks. A pair of cardboard skeletons hang from the porch, either in preparation for an approaching Halloween or for one that recently passed, or maybe the **[End Page 174]** residents simply liked the way they looked and decided to keep them up all year round. Such is the oddball spirit of the Mississippi Delta, as captured by Schuyler Clay.

Other pictures feature dogs in the wild, no signs of civilization in sight. In *Dalmatian Dog, Mississippi Delta*, a Dalmatian stands at the edge of a sun-blasted field. Though the pictures are presented in a sepia-toned black and white, we imagine the scattered tufts of grass as yellow and dying. In *Field Dogs, Mississippi Delta*, a pair of mutts stands in the middle foreground, eyeballing the photographer. Scraggly trees rise behind them, at the far end of the withered, sandy field. These photos evoke the region's summertime heat; looking at them, the viewer can practically feel the oppressive humidity clinging to your skin. During Mississippi summers, as the temperature creeps up over a hundred degrees, everything green begins to die. The dogs, however, seem indifferent. Casting them as casual, curious observers allows this collection to rise above the cutesiness one might expect of a photography book devoted to dogs and to see them instead as elements bridging wilderness...

## BOOK REVIEW

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