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Contributors

Dana Chamblee Carpenter is the award-winning author of Bohemian Gospel, The Devil's Bible, and Book of the Just. In 2020, she collaborated with HarperCollins/Thomas Nelson on an anthology, Women Who Wrote: Stories and Poems from Audacious Literary Mavens, designed to introduce

these women writer-ancestors to readers in a bold new way. She has a PhD in American and Women's Literature from the University of Mississippi, though she recently escaped the world of academia and now writes full-time.

Floyd Collins holds an MFA in Creative Writing and a PhD in Twentieth-Century Literature from the University of Arkansas. He has authored several volumes of poetry, including My Back Pages: The Teresa Poems (2022). The Living Artifact, a selection of his essay-reviews, appeared in 2021. Most recently, Waking Past Midnight: Selected Poems, a career retrospective, was published by Stephen F. Austin State UP in 2023.

Scott Dickison is a poet and minister in Jackson, Mississippi. Originally from North Carolina, he holds a theological degree from Harvard Divinity School and an MFA from Queens University in Charlotte.

Mark Dozier is a writer of fiction, both long-form and short stories. He was raised in the South and went on to travel the world and eventually become a world history and geography teacher both in America and abroad in Singapore and Sierra Leone. His upbringing and travels have heavily influenced his writing. He earned a master's degree in creative writing at the University of Florida and has had a short story published in the Mississippi Review and in Leg Iron Books' Halloween anthology, Monster (October, 2024).

Alma Dale Fairbanks, a painter by trade, a writer by habit, has her large-scale canvases in collections all over the continental United States, as well as Australia and Nova Scotia. She is currently working on a book of paintings, essays, and a memoir of her travels as an artist.

David Fowler has stories in The Threepenny Review, North American Review, River Teeth, Pithead Chapel, and Oxford American. He's legally blind and writes, slowly, in Jackson, Mississippi, after living in New York and on a ranch in Texas.

Gregory Hansen is Professor of Folklore and English at Arkansas State University where he also teaches in the Heritage Studies PhD Program. He recently coedited Sustaining Support for Intangible Cultural Heritage and he has published on roots music, public folklore, and a range of topics. He recently was inducted as a Fellow of the American Folklore Society.

Dan Jacoby is a graduate of St. Louis University, and Governors State University. He has published poetry in Bombay Gin, Euphony, Red Fez, Black Heart Review, R.K.V.Y, Steel Toe Review and other fine publications. He is a former educator, steel worker, and counterintelligence agent. His work is influenced by the poets John Knoepfle, Al Montesi, Dobby, and John Logan to name a few. He has been nominated in 2015 and 2020 for a Pushcart and Best of the Net in 2021. He is the author of the book Blue Jeaned Buddhists.

Eulea Kiraly is a second-year MFA candidate at the University of Central Arkansas, where she served as managing editor of the Arkana Literary Magazine. Before starting the course, she lived less than an hour from the Mississippi River and taught in three different prisons in the Arkansas Delta. Before that, she lived in Australia, where her works of short fiction, poetry, and arts journalism appeared in Artlook, ANU Reporter, Canberra Times, and Muse. Recent publications in the United States include poetry and creative nonfiction with Thimble and Medicine and Meaning.

Mary Meriam studied poetry at Columbia University (MFA) and Bennington College (BA). She works as an editor and publisher of lesbian poetry and art, and teaches in the MFA program at the University of Arkansas Monticello. Her most recent poetry collection is Pools of June (Exot Books, 2022). Her poems have appeared in Literary Imagination, Literary Matters, Poetry, Prelude, Subtropics, and The Poetry Review

Terry Minchow-Proffitt lives in St. Louis, Missouri. He was raised in the rural Delta of eastern Arkansas and draws great inspiration from this region and its people. His poems have appeared in various journals and magazines. His published collections and chapbooks are Seven Last Words (2015), Chickentrain: Poems from the Arkansas Delta (2016), Sweetiebetter (2019), and Pray Tell in the Key of Blue (2024).

Andrew Alexander Mobbs is the author of the poetry collection, In These Glorious Pastures, and two chapbooks, A Walk in the Garden (Bottlecap P, 2024) and Strangers and Pilgrims (Six Gallery P, 2013). A Pushcart Prize nominee, he’s grateful his poems appear in Frontier Poetry, Terrain.org, Arkansas Review, New Delta Review, and other fine publications.

Charles Moffat is a retired archaeologist, 76 years old, who has carried out many archaeological projects in the Midwestern United States during a career that spans 48 years. He holds a PhD from the University of Illinois. A few of the sites he has investigated are unusual and inspire him to imagine stories about their ancient occupants. A conversation with a member of the Arkansas Archaeological Survey provided stimulus for the story published in this issue of Arkansas Review.

Madelyn Musick is a Missouri-born, Minnesota-raised writer, teacher, and photographer. She has an MFA in creative writing from the University of North Carolina–Wilmington where she studied poetry. She is a 2025 Tin House poetry workshop alum. Her work is forthcoming in the McNeese Review and Little Patuxent Review.

Linda Parsons is the Poet Laureate of Knoxville, Tennessee. She is also the poetry editor for Madville Publishing and the copy editor for Chapter 16, the literary website of Humanities Tennessee. She is published in such journals as The Georgia Review, Iowa Review, Prairie Schooner, Southern Poetry Review, The Chattahoochee Review, and many others. Her sixth collection is Valediction: Poems and Prose. Five of her plays have been produced by Flying Anvil Theatre in Knoxville.

Brent Riffel holds a doctorate in American History from the University of Arkansas-Fayetteville. He currently is a member of the faculty at College of the Canyons in Valencia, California. He has published a number of articles on the civil rights movement in, among other publications, the Arkansas Historical Quarterly and Arsnick: The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in Arkansas, edited by John Kirk.

David Roediger teaches American Studies at the University of Kansas. His recent books include An Ordinary White, The Sinking Middle Class, and How Race Survived US History.

Marcus Charles Tribbett is General Editor of Arkansas Review: A Journal of Delta Studies and Associate Professor of English at Arkansas State University. He has published scholarly work on blues performers, on a nineteenth-century slave narrative, and on contemporary American

literature.

Claude Wilkinson is a critic, essayist, painter, and poet. His most recent poetry collection is Soon Done with the Crosses. He received the Whiting Award for Poetry in 2000.

S.E. Wilson's work has appeared or is forthcoming in Chiron Review, The Berlin Literary Review, Bright Flash Literary Review, The Louisville Review, New World Writing Quarterly, and The Saturday Evening Post, among others.

Jianqing (John) Zheng is author of The Dog Years of Reeducation, Enforced Rustication in the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Delta Sun, and The Landscape of Mind and editor of African American Haiku, The Other World of Richard Wright, and Sonia Sanchez's Poetic Spirit through Haiku. He is a two-time recipient of the literary arts fellowship from Mississippi Arts Commission and edits Valley Voices: A Literary Review and Journal of Ethnic American Literature.

Arkansas Review 56.3 (December 2025)

Featured: A Boneyard of Laughter-Silvered Wings

By Dana Chamblee Carpenter

Piper sat high in the sycamore watching her house burn. She wasn't sad about it.
A half-mile west, the schoolhouse burned a brighter orange along the horizon like another setting sun. A thin, dark line of clouds pulled taut between the two balls of flame, near and far.

The tender skin of her legs slid along the cool, smooth bark of the straddled limb as she turned toward the growing dark. The tiny post office, Pop's General Store, a dozen homes sprinkled between the highway and Village Creek—all gone to fire and ash. Katydids that hadn't burned, warbled out an evening call, and left behind lightning bugs ventured out into the smoky dusk, flickering questions. Piper shoved her hand into the leather satchel slung across her back and pulled out an old rosewood recorder that had belonged to her mother's mother's mother. She played "Greensleeves" for the survivors as night fell on the last fiery throes of Moran, Arkansas.

Sacrifices were expected in a time of war.

The only home Piper had ever known would become an Army airbase to train new pilots to send overseas to avenge those lost at Pearl Harbor. That's what her daddy said at supper one night weeks ago. Early next morning, he packed his family into the truck, his pocket crammed with the cash he'd gotten for the house. Daddy and Mama and Piper's eight younger siblings had rattled away, wakes of dust rolling like thunder-heads around her as she watched them go.

There wasn't room for her.

Piper wasn't angry or scared about it. Or if she was, she didn't know how to show it. She knew from studying other folks when she ought to be happy or afraid. But it was like playing Simon Says. Simon says smile, Simon says frown, wiggle waggle. Simon says cry. She just couldn't get the knack of it on her own.

What Piper had a knack for was machines. It wasn't something she decided to be good at— she didn't really work that way. In her life, something just was. Or it wasn't.

A year back, she'd come home after school one day to find an untidy trail of parts and tools out back of the house that led to her daddy's pickup, hood lifted, doors agape as if it were panicking, screaming, its mouth wide. Piper reckoned she'd scream too if her innards were spilled hither and

yon. She set to work, gathering bits of truck and tool, compelled by a need to stop its suffering. She flung herself over the grille and looked down at the puzzle of metal and tubes and wires. She just seemed to know where the parts belonged.

“Get out from there, girl.”

Piper had gone still at the sound of her daddy’s voice. She wasn’t afraid. She just knew what was coming. Smiling at the put-back-together engine, she dug her feet into the dirt and twisted out from under the hood.

“What the hell did you do?” He wasn’t yelling. He hardly ever did. “I fixed the truck.” She stared off at the pig pen just past her daddy’s shoulder. Piper didn’t much like to look people in the eyes.

“What you did was undo the heap of work I done already. Now I got to take it all apart again.”

His voice got tight like a fresh-strung clothesline. “No sir, you don’t.”
“What’s that?”

“I fixed it,” she said again.

“You ain’t done no such thing.”

She knew better than to say more. She just stood there until he finally tossed himself into the cab of the truck with a laugh. He was laughing at her. He laughed as he slapped at the gas valve and turned the ignition and yanked the choke. He stopped laughing when the truck came to life on the third turn of the engine.

Quick as a blink, he was out of the cab, fingers dug into the back of her neck. “Some boy teach you to do that?”

“The truck told me.”

She said it as quiet as she could. She knew it’d make him mad, but Piper didn’t know how to tell a lie. It wasn’t that she didn’t want to—life would’ve been easier if she could’ve lied about most everything. But Piper had only ever told what she knew to be true, bare-naked, though she’d learned to say it soft.

Saying it soft didn’t matter to her daddy. To be fair, it didn’t matter to most folks.

Until that moment with the truck, Piper had lived in a world of dissonance, as if everyone around her were a half-note sharp or flat. Or maybe she was the one off-key. She’d given up trying to understand. Best she could figure, there wasn’t any way to make a harmony between her and everybody else. But setting the truck to rights made her feel quiet and easy like the bass at the back of Glenn Miller’s “The White Cliffs of Dover”—nothing anybody’d ever notice unless they were listening for it, but a part of the tune all the same.

Now everything was silent. Ash and ember and gone.

Piper sighed as she lifted the sycamore branch above her to eye the harvest moon rising. She couldn’t see them from her tree—the machines come to build the base—but they were there, sleeping in the same disheveled night as she.

When her neck grew stiff with pining, she dropped like a buttonball from the sycamore, her feet black with soot and warm at the sole by time she met up with the bulldozers and scrapers sitting all quiet and still and cattywampus against the clean lines of a runway. Piper ran silent hands over metal bodies, seeking out signs of anything amiss, like a mama cat licking a newborn kitten that’s been taken away and brought back.

She had borne witness to the men who worked the machines. Men only cared about getting a job done, and the machines only mattered after they broke. But to Piper, she and they were part of something kindred. They let her know when a thing wasn’t right with them. They had a voice—not loud and barking, but purr-like, humming and vibrating. Soft. A person just needed to listen.

Even now, at the edge of what was left of the woods, the moon slid up the sky behind the tip of the tall neck of the crane and rested there, like a glowing, marble eye, softly, kindly, looking down on Piper as she pressed herself deep into the creature’s innards to clean out a gummed-up oil valve.

She came back to the world when a subtle hint of dawn dusted the horizon like chalk, her eyes heavy and her belly hollow. Piper had nowhere to go. The sycamore and charred leftovers of Moran would be full gone by noon to make room for a base hospital. A ditch would do for sleep, but only the half-grown base could promise food.

Her satchel pressed hard against her thigh, she came to the base as the smell of bacon lured her closer to the men’s voices eddying against the metal walls of a nearby hangar. But another sound, like the rumble of a timpani, pianissimo, rolled through the air from the west and caught her. The men walked to the edge of tarmac and looked to the sky.

So did Piper.
Then noise dropped like bombs—a sonorous, rhythmic pounding—as dozens of planes soared overhead. Something inside Piper broke. All at once. Like stone cracking. But she didn't feel broken. She felt born.

"What's their name?" she hollered to no one particular.

"Them's trainer planes for the men to practice on before they go fly in the war," a man answered as the planes disappeared into the sky toward Walnut Ridge. He never looked at her. "They's called Vultee BT-13 Valiants. They gone to do a flyover for the folks in town. They'll be back."

Piper spun off across the wide shelf of the taxiway and onto a patch of grass choked on either side by the two finished runways. It was Sunday-morning quiet as she knelt to wait.

"Vultee BT-13 Valiants."

She said it like a prayer.

When the planes came back, Piper was something different.

There had been before and now was after.

She watched them land, rushing past on either side, waves of pushed air washing over her and smelling of fuel and oil and something she couldn't identify. Piper wondered if flight had a smell.

She followed the last of them down the taxiway toward the dirt patch where the ramp was not yet built. The planes spun their tails, raking her with their breath. She walked among them until she came to the end of the line, to the last Valiant. She shivered as the propeller shuddered and stopped. There was something different about this one.

The pilot shoved the canopy back and stood in the cockpit, reached up and pulled the helmet off, letting loose a carpet of shoulder-length blonde curls. She put her hands into the small of her back and stretched.

She.

It was as if Piper had been listening to the song of her life and the needle suddenly jumped tracks. The whole of her that had been let loose when the planes arrived now poured like water from a spillway toward the plane or to the woman—Piper couldn't tell which. Maybe it was both.

The woman looked down at Piper, a smile spreading. All Piper could think to do was run. Away from the thrum of the Valiant calling to her. Away from the blonde pilot and her smile. Piper's hair came undone from its usual knot and fell behind her like a piece of herself torn loose.

She spent the day hiding in the toolshed loft watching new people come and go. She considered herself to be among the strangers. Her skin felt too tight, as if she were a snake in need of molting. Piper felt. For the first time. For the first time, she wanted something.

After dusk, the men went elsewhere, and the planes were left alone. She wanted to go straight to her Valiant, but she felt oddly shy. She drifted from one plane to another, introducing herself, until desire overwhelmed her. She raced past the last rows to the last Valiant, hers.

Piper ran her hands along the smooth slope of the propeller blade, her fingers trembling a little as she said hello. She felt unearthly, like mist, as she moved around the body of the plane and came to lay her head softly against the aluminum skin of the nose, cool against her forehead, before sliding down beneath the belly. She pulled out her recorder and played soft tunes to reverberate through the metal and soothe the planes on their first night in a new place. She was halfway through a sonata that rippled like wind over wings when a voice broke through.

“That’s beautiful. You write it?”

Piper sat up straight and watched the feet and legs walk closer. She wouldn’t bend down to look out.

“Bach wrote it. Flute Sonata in E-Flat Major.”

“Now how did you learn Bach out here in the middle of nowhere?”

The legs and feet stopped. Piper held her breath.
“I heard it on the radio.”

“And learned to play it? Just from listening?”

The legs bent at the knees, a tendril of blonde hair dropped below the metal casing of the plane’s nose, and then Piper was looking into the face of the woman pilot. She almost looked away. But whatever had broken loose in her that afternoon wouldn’t allow it.

“I did,” Piper said.

“That’s unbelievable.”

“I assure you I did. I heard it. I played it.”

“No, I meant that’s amazing,” the woman said. “What else can you do?”

Piper cocked her head.

“Do you remember everything you hear or just music? What about books? Do you remember those, too? I’ve heard about people who can do that. That makes you special. I’m Rosa, by the way.”

She put out her hand as she dropped to sit on the ground.

Piper didn’t touch people. She didn’t decide, now, to press her hand into Rosa’s—her body just did it, like a magnet drawn. The feel of Rosa’s calloused skin against her own, still stained with oil, stirred the newness in her.

“Piper,” she said, and, in the next breath. “Books, too.”

“You like airplanes?” Rosa reached up and let her fingers run lightly along the underbelly.

Piper heard the Valiant purr like a cat. She wondered if Rosa could hear it too.

“I want to fly.”

Rosa laughed. “How old are you?”

Piper didn’t think of herself in numbers, so she had to count. “Seventeen.”

“You on your own?”

Piper nodded. She didn’t understand the crease in Rosa’s forehead.

“I want to fly.”

“I can surely do that. The trainees aren’t here yet. We’ll have our pick of planes.”

“I want to fly this one.” Piper put her hand on the fuselage of her Valiant.

“Why this one?”

“This one is... special.” It was the word Rosa used to describe Piper.

“Special how?”

“It wants.” Most of the machines Piper met were content doing what they were meant to do. Simon says go. Simon says stop. But not her Valiant.

“Wants what?”

“More.”

Piper couldn’t explain because her Valiant couldn’t say what more it wanted.

“More.” Piper couldn’t explain because her Valiant couldn’t say what more it wanted.

The crease came back to Rosa’s forehead.

“It’s late. Let’s hit the sack and start fresh tomorrow,” she said as she stood and pulled Piper up with her. Piper left her hand entwined with Rosa’s until they came under the base lights and Rosa let go. “I’ll see you in the morning,” she said as she headed off toward the mess.

As Piper climbed back up into the shed loft, a memory woke—her grandmother cradling her head and holding a spoon against her lips. Little Piper had been terribly sick with measles and a high fever. She was dying, but her mother’s mother fought to keep her. Piper remembered the sugary sourness of honeyed apple trickling into her mouth, the soft humming of her grandmother’s voice.

Piper wrapped the memory in a bundle in her mind alongside the warmth of her skin against the chill metal of the Valiant and the roughness of her hand pressed into Rosa’s—they were one and the same to her.

In the early hours before dawn, Piper broke into the operation chief’s office and read the maintenance manual for the Vultee BT-13 Valiant. She met Rosa at the perimeter of the parked planes and walked with her as they did the preflight check on the Valiant.

“Spinner. Controlled-pitch propeller. Nose. Wing. Fuselage. Flap. Aileron. Tail. Rudder. Elevator.”

Piper touched the parts as she named them. It was probably the most words she’d spoken all at once in her whole life.

“You know your planes. Now let’s go fly one.”
Rosa put her gloved hand into the small of Piper’s back as they crawled into the tandem cockpits.

Piper ran her fingers lightly over the instruments.

“Fuel pressure gauge. Altimeter. Climb indicator. Ammeter. Tachometer. Clock,” she whispered and then lifted her face, breathing in the scent. There was a sweetness among the twang of oil and metal and leather and sweat. She couldn’t tell if it was the vanilla in Rosa’s hair or some sweet smell that belonged to the Valiant.

As they sped down the runway and lifted, feather-like, Piper forgot everything except herself and the plane. Even Rosa faded into the periphery of blue sky and clouds and motion and something that felt like arpeggios rippling up and down her insides and through the Valiant. Was this joy—hers and the plane’s?

The lines of a poem she’d heard on the radio came to her.

Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth and danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings.

Piper had never understood poetry much, but she understood now as this feeling bubbled up and out in raucous laughter. The Valiant laughed with her.

Piper never looked down, but she knew when the wheels touched the tarmac. She wept because the Valiant wept, sad to be tethered once more.

At the purple ends of the day, Rosa walked Piper to her toolshed.

“I want to kiss you,” she said.

“Okay.”

Piper didn’t understand why she was trembling as Rosa leaned closer. As their lips touched, she thought of simple things her mouth did—eating, breathing. She thought of brushing her teeth. She thought of making words, the feel of her tongue holding the shape of them. She had never thought about the feel of lips—her own or another’s—how soft they were but with hills and valleys and bits of wrinkled skin. When the honeyed-apple feeling burned in her chest, she took Rosa’s hands in her own and wondered what was happening to her until Rosa pulled back, smiling. Piper lifted her hands to her lips and pressed, but it didn’t feel the same.

“Tomorrow, I’ll teach you to fly,” Rosa said as she walked away.

In the days that followed of more flying and more Rosa, Piper wove what she felt for her Valiant and what she felt with Rosa into one tangy sweetness that was maybe joy and maybe something

more.

The sun was low in the day when they landed. Rosa and Piper put the Valiant to bed, but another pilot was getting ready to clock IFR hours—flying solely by instrument readings in the dead of night because war sometimes meant killing in the dark.

“Clear!” the pilot yelled as he cranked the engine which turned over but didn’t come to life.

“Try her again,” a mechanic nearby hollered.

“Stop.”

The pilot didn’t hear Piper—or didn’t care if he did. He cranked the engine again. She ran, vaulting herself onto the wing and grabbing his arm.

“Stop!”

He shoved and sent her spinning backward, off the wing. She landed hard on the ground near the propeller.

“What’s all this?”

The deep voice came from a very tall man who covered the distance with long, bold strides.

There was saluting and quiet among the men.

“Is someone going to tell me what the hell’s going on?”

No one spoke, but everyone looked at Piper.

“What’s the problem, Miss?”

Piper turned her eyes to the tall man. She forced herself to keep them there.

“The engine is the problem.”
“There ain’t no problem with the engine, chief. I just serviced it,” the mechanic said. “And how could you know a thing about it?”

“She knows planes,” Rosa said.

“What’d you think’s wrong with the engine?” the chief asked.

“Fuel leaking from a fissure in the line,” Piper answered.

“How on earth could you know that?”

Piper couldn’t say she heard the plane begging. It didn’t want to die.

She drew her shoulders back and, for the first time in her life, she lied.

“I can smell it.”

“You can smell it? We got oil, dirt, fresh-poured concrete, but you can smell a fuel leak inside an engine as you walk by?” The chief sounded like her daddy.

“That’s just cockeyed, boss,” the mechanic said. The pilot laughed.

The chief shook his head and started to turn away, but Piper stepped in front of him, her jaw set, eyes fierce.

“I can prove it.”

He stared at her, looking for what she didn’t know, but she stared back. When he shoved his hands in his pockets, Piper knew she’d won.

“Show me then,” he said.

Piper lowered the casing to expose the engine.

“Pratt & Whitney R-985 Wasp Junior. Crankshaft, intake valve, starter drive, exhaust valve.”

She slid her hand behind the shielding, letting the plane guide her, until her fingers felt the slimy wet. She held them out to the chief.

He sniffed. “That’s pure gasoline.” He looked over at the mechanic. “You have a fuel leak.”

“Sir, I—”

The mechanic stepped closer to the engine as the pilot jumped down from the cockpit.

“I’m not interested in excuses,” the chief said. “I want it fixed. And I want—”

He turned to Piper.

“What’s your name?”

Now that she knew the plane would be okay, the urgency driving her left like a sigh. Her eyes drifted back down to the dirt.

“Piper.”

“Piper, you just saved this man’s life.”

He didn’t sound like her daddy anymore.

“I know it.”

The chief turned to the pilot.

“You have something you want to say, son?”

“Thank you, ma’am,” he muttered and then headed off to the barracks.

“You want to help my man here find that leaky fuel line and replace it?” the chief asked.

Suddenly, a flicker of another might-be came to life, another desire.

“Yessir, but—”

The words caught in Piper’s dry mouth. Her Valiant kept feeding them to her until they forced their way out.

“But I want more.”

The chief raised his eyebrows.

“I want to work on the planes again tomorrow. And the day after that. I just… I want to work on the planes.”

“Let’s see how you do with this one, and then we can have a talk about the rest.”

Rosa leaned in close.

“I’m going on over to the mess. You catch up later.”

Piper nodded.

Her world was full of possibilities when she knocked on Rosa’s door a few hours later.

“I’d ask how it went, but I can tell from the smile on your face.”

Piper raised her hand to her mouth. Had she been smiling?

“Hold on to that feeling. It’s called triumph and it comes rare for women like us.”

For the first time in her life, Piper could read another person. She knew what came next.

“You’re leaving.”

Rosa nodded from where she lay on the cot.

“They’re flying a C-47 in tomorrow morning to drop off equipment and a batch of trainees. Someone’s got to ferry the plane on to Texas, and they’re looking for test pilots out there.”

She shrugged.

“Sounds more fun than training a group of boys, wet-behind-the-ears, who think they know more than me.”
Piper leaned into the door.

“It’s not personal.”

She felt the cleaving then—herself from Rosa, Rosa from her Valiant.

“You want to stay here tonight? Or—”

Piper already had her hand on the doorknob. For her, going was gone. And goodbyes were pointless.

She went to visit the machines at the end of the still-being-built runway. Hellos were as needless as goodbyes, at least among friends. It was the touch of hand they’d missed. It was being heard and finding a place in the song that mattered. The machines hummed along as Piper, hands covered in grease, played sad songs on her mother’s mother’s mother’s rosewood recorder until dawn.

She watched the C-47 soar onto the base with the early morning light. She walked onto the runway, but only when Rosa was taxiing the plane out to depart. In awe, she watched the wheels lift from the tarmac, a Goliath impossibly airborne. Piper believed in the impossible.

And now, she believed in longing. She longed for that honey-apple feeling Rosa took with her. It had made life interesting as if Piper was the countermelody to whatever song Rosa was singing. With the machines, the connection was harmony, a layering of voices, a symphony. With her Valiant, it was unison.

Was that love?

Rosa sent a letter every week after she left. Piper tried to write back, but she couldn’t think how to say what she felt, so she bought a card in the commissary she thought Rosa would like—a birthday card with Pluto on it though it wasn’t her birthday.

All she could think to write was:

Thank you for the letter.

Or:

It snowed yesterday.

She wanted to write:

Come back.

In January of a new year of the same war, the chief came to Piper as she worked on an engine. He had a piece of paper in his hand.

“It’s Rosa. She was tugging a target for the artillery boys to practice shooting. They hit her plane instead.”

“What kind of plane?” was all Piper could think to ask.

“A Douglas Devastator.”

Piper thought about Rosa’s lips, wondering what they felt like now, knowing she’d never again taste that same honeyed-apple—surely that was more than longing. But was it love? If it was, Piper only understood it by its absence.

An answer came eleven days later on a foggy Sunday morning. There was no Sabbath in times of war.

She felt it before she heard it. An instructor and cadet aborted takeoff and slowed to turn off the runway, but another Valiant—her Valiant—was landing. The pilot couldn’t see in the fog.

Piper ran to the runway with the men who were yelling orders. Alarms blared as water trucks revved toward a ball of flame. But the sound in Piper’s head rose like a descant over all the others.

Her Valiant screaming as the flames took it.

She ran toward it even as the heat blistered her face and singed her hair. Arms closed around her waist, holding her back.

“They’re safe! The men,” the chief yelled in her ear. “Look.”

He turned her toward where the other plane had been shoved down the runway, mangled but not on fire, the pilots laid out on the ground in a circle of medics.

Piper twisted in his arms, back toward her Valiant. She looked up into the chief’s eyes. She could feel, feel, the hope and desperation ripping her open, a chasm.

This was love.

She whispered, mouthed, “The plane?”

His arms tightened as if he knew what would happen next as he shook his head.

“It’s too late.”

Piper threw her head back against his chest as she shoved up with her legs trying to break free.

She would save her Valiant.
She would.

She would.

Like all things, the end of the war came slowly and then all at once. The base had grown—dozens of new buildings, thousands of pilots trained and forty-two who died, twice that many babies born in the base hospital. Life was an ebb and flow.

Until someone dropped a bomb.

The war was over.

Men left. Most of the planes ferried out. Operation transferred from the Army to the Navy. The base became a boneyard for warbirds no longer wanted.

When the Navy ordered the mechanics to gut the planes for parts, Piper quit. She hauled the burnt shell she'd saved from her Valiant to a left-behind barn in an overgrown field at the edge of the base.

She haunted the boneyard at the witching hour. If not for her grief, which swallowed everything, the boneyard would have been more than Piper could bear—Flying Fortresses and Liberators lined in tidy rows, giant bodies helpless like beached whales, Mustangs and Warhawks stacked on their noses, tails flung skyward as if they were diving deep into hell.

Thousands of planes came there to die.

Moonlight raked their silvered wings, summoning ghostly memories of touching the sun and dancing on clouds, but there was no laughter now.

At first, Piper walked among them as if their suffering was just an extension of her own. But one night, at the back edge of the boneyard, she came upon a camp of B-32 Dominators unlike the others. No art painted on their noses. No identifying numbers. No battle scars on the tall, sleek tails towering up.

These planes were straight from the factory, born only to die.

Their grief was for a life they'd never even had a chance to live, and their emptiness pulled from Piper the too much that smothered her. She told them stories—of other planes in the boneyard, of her life, of Rosa, and of her Valiant. She wept with them, and she played for them on nights of long waiting before the day when they would be rolled away in the steady march of savage and melt.

But the planes wanted more.

They wanted some part of themselves to live on, and they wanted to give Piper a measure of the peace she'd given them. They wanted her to live again.

That's what they told her as they offered parts of themselves.

Gasket, valve, pump.

That's what they told her when she pulled metal sheathing from a wing or underbelly.

Spinner, spar cap, wing ribs.

That's what they whispered as she crawled up into cockpits and stripped the instrument panel, rudder pedals, stick.

When she came to tell them that the work was done, they told her to fly.

Piper taxied out to the runway in the wee hours. The plane vibrating under her was like a Valiant—not her Valiant who was gone forever. But it was also something new, something not built by men but born of loss and love. She felt the plane wanting—wanting to fly, wanting to see new places, wanting to live, bold and free.

Piper wanted, too.

As they lifted into the chalky dawn, she took a sad look down to what was left of the planes in the boneyard, the planes she could not save. Their silver wings caught the easy morning light and glimmered with parting joy.

The thrill of first flight bubbled up from the Valiant and burst out in laughter as Piper scanned the wide horizon.

Reviews

Of Salt and Spirit: Black Quilters in the American South. Edited by Sharbreon Plummer. (Jackson, Mis-sissippi: University Press of Missis-sippi, 2025. Pp. 168, 95 black & white and color illustrations. $40, hardcover)

Sharbreon Plummer introduces her edited volume with Ashley M. Jones's poem "I Cannot Talk About the South Without Talking About Black Women." This poem is from her longer work Reparations Now!, and it is the source for the title of both this new publication and the travel- ing exhibition that is the source of the book. "Of Salt and Spirit" symbolizes the strengths of eld- erly Black women, and this literary allusion is an apt representation of the creativity that is so ev- ident in this presentation of fifty-one quilts and twelve portraits of quilters from an exhibit that was curated from the Mississippi Museum of Art's collection. The color plates brilliantly illus- trate a range of Black quilting styles, and various essays by quilters and curators richly support this beautiful book's content. Half of the quilts are from the collection of Roland L. Freeman, many of which were in- cluded in the museum's recent exhibition that is traveling through the region. Freeman was a pho- tographer and folklorist, who was honored as a National Heritage Fellow in 2007. Primarily a documentarian, Freeman is well known for his photographs of Civil Rights events—notably the Mule Train procession—sites associated with nu- merous communities' daily and expressive life,

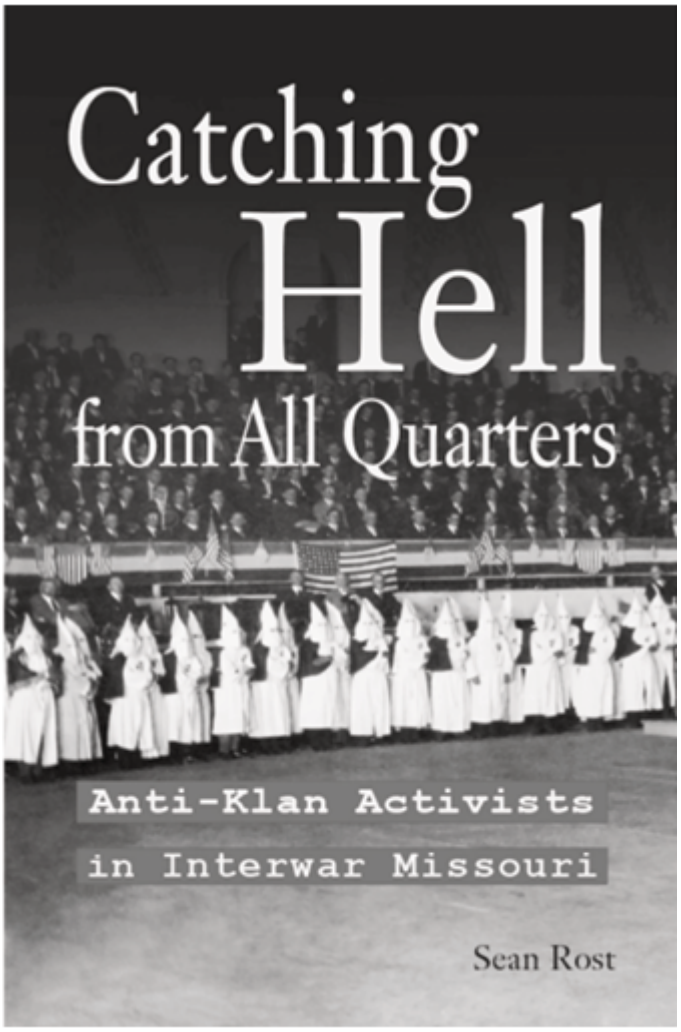


and portraits of Black artists and musicians. One of his most significant works is the massive work A Communion of the Spirits: African-American Quilters, Preservers, and Their Stories. Freeman's in-depth presentation of over 300 photos of dozens of quilters from thirty-eight states reflects his life-long love of quilts and quiltmakers. Freeman passed in 2023, and the Mississippi Museum of Art has graciously accepted and now houses his personal collection of quilts, photographs associ- ated with quilting, and his fieldnotes and se- lected personal papers. Freeman's impact from a lifetime of documenting and preserving the leg- acy of folk arts is a major element of this new vol- ume's appeal. Of Salt and Spirit includes tributes and essays from Freeman's friends and colleagues that animate the book. The exhibit and the book affirm his talent and the creative spirit that emerges through viewing the quilts through his camera's lens as well as the images made by other photographers that are part of the exhibit's cura-

tion. Freeman was also a quilter, himself, and it is reassuring to know that his own work is valued and preserved through the museum's collection. Of Salt and Spirit is a beautifully crafted book. Entries by Sharbreon Plummer, Lauren Cross, and the museum's director, Betsy Bradley, introduce the volume and the art work presented be- tween its covers. The photographs are arranged into five sections: Homecoming, The Gathering, Aesthetics of Place, Bond by Love, and Keepers of the Cloth. Excerpts from the writing of Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and bell hooks introduce various sections as epigraphs that are then devel- oped in written commentary and through the photographs of quilts featured in the exhibit. The themes are well chosen, and the photographs' patterns and imagery open new insights and re- flections that evoke the depth of this artistic expression. It is a book to be enjoyed on an initial reading and then savored with additional viewings. The black and white photographs and color plates of quilts and quiltmakers vividly convey the artworks' vibrancy, and quilt aficionados will recognize a range of patterns and styles such as string quilts, yo-yo quilts, and story quilts. The curators take special care to avoid monolithic interpretations through loaded terms that are too facilely used to portray the art as primitive or improvisatory, and their commentary along with the quilts breaks stereotypes about Black aes- thetic values. Although most of the artists are known pri- marily within their own families and communities, a number of the quiltmakers have received major recognition and have had their work presented in various exhibits and publications. Most of the artwork is presented with minimal contextual information as the accompanying text re- flects the content and style of preparing the museum labels that are part of the exhibition. Those interested in more information on the art- ists themselves can find biographical information on some of the quilters in the writing of Freeman and other quilt researchers. The past half-century has seen a burgeoning of interest in quilt documentation, as well as scholarship on the art, and the book serves as an excellent entry point for subsequent inquiry into this engaging art Quilt making, in general, and quilt making by Black quilters, in particular, is featured in a wealth of scholarship and clearly serves as a re- source for Of Salt and Spirit, but this book would have been burdened down with much more written commentary and arcane scholarship. The emphasis on the artistry that emerges through the photographs of quilts reflects the persepctive and values inherent in curating a museum ex- hibit. Whether or not objects can speak for them- selves is a moot point, but it is clear that the editors, contributors, and designers of this won- derful publication have been inspired to create a wonderful representation of richness of expres- sion that emerges both through historical quilts as well as in the manifestations of creative expres- sion found in contemporary quiltmaking. It is to the credit of the Mississippi Museum of Art that they have also developed a traveling exhibit on these quilts. Viewing the actual quilts will ob- viously animate how Of Salt and Spirit engages readers with the artistic traditions. The book will serve as an excellent accompanying publication for those who have viewed the exhibit. It also stands by itself as an excellent presentation of the quilts.
--Gregory Hansen

Catching Hell from All Quarters: Anti-Klan Activists in Interwar ## Missouri. By Sean Rost. (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2025. Pp. xvi + 87, list of il-lustrations, preface, acknowledg-ments, notes, bibliography, index. $55, hardcover)

Half a lifetime ago I was researching in Chi- cago’s fabulous Newberry Library and came upon a book compiling names and descriptions of the incredible number of secret societies in the post-World War One United States. My interest stemmed from working on an article on the var- ied forms labor organizations historically have taken, some of them secret societies. I expected to encounter in the volume the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), which some historians estimate to have had five million members at its postwar height. It was there, along with a wide range of kindred groups and spinoffs. One expert cited in Catching Hell from All Quarters reckoned there were 800 far-right groups like the Klan at one point in the 1930s. What was unexpected in that old volume was a staggering number of anti-Klan forma- tions, by no means confined to the secular left or the big cities. Such groups have not gone unnoticed by his- torians. To tell the story of the Klan itself, as sev- eral classic studies have done, requires consideration of its frequent defeats and there- fore of its opponents. Anti-fascism has occupied the attention of scholars and the fears of readers increasingly. However, for the heyday of the mod- ern Klan, the 1920s, there is very little rendering of the history of the Klan from the vantage of the study of its vanquishers.



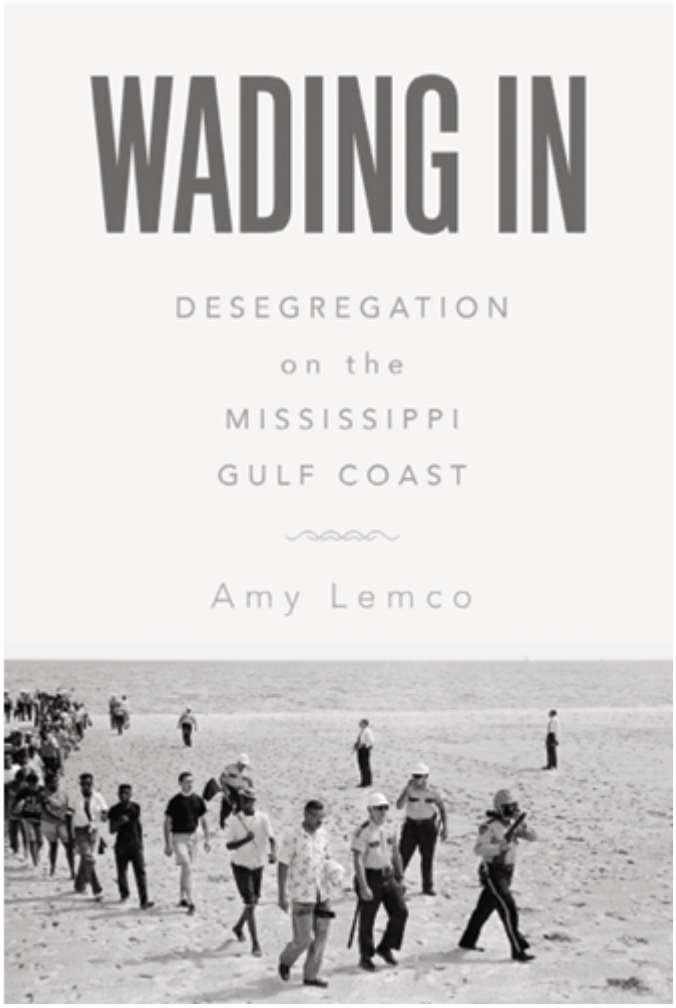
Thanks to Sean Rost we now do have an au- thoritative history of anti-Klan coalitions in an important battleground state, one where the Klan recruited successfully and contested for po- litical power within both the Democratic and Re- publican parties. In choosing Missouri, Rost opted for his home state. Indeed he reports that his early interest in the subject was piqued by learning of the resistance to bigotry of central Missouri German Catholics, who counted among their numbers Rost's own ancestors, and who were bulwarks against the anti-Catholic KKK. His widening analysis treats the entirety of the state, including especially the lead belt and southwest Missouri more generally, the Bootheel in the southeast, and the urban centers of St. Louis and Kansas City. Since there is no full his- tory of the Klan itself in Missouri, Rost had to construct both parts of a sprawling story from the ground. He establishes Missouri as an important

center of bigoted journalism, Klan recruitment, and local KKK electoral successes but, in telling contrast to nearby Indiana, meager successes at securing political power statewide. While Catching Hell treats the years between the two world wars, and includes some impor- tant post-1945 material, the drama is very con- centrated in the 1920s. It is an account of wild ups-and-downs. Rost's title stems from a 1922 complaint in the sermon of a pro-Klan St. Louis preacher, who portrayed his forces as much be- leaguered. Within two years, the KKK seemed poised to run the state. By the decade's end, and sooner in much of the state, it was defeated in Missouri, though what Rost calls the "spirit of the Klan" (p. 241) persisted in a variety of organ- izations. The spread of the Klan, and of opposition to it, first centered on the press and Rost's first two chapters skillfully mine newspapers to cap- ture the beginnings of the Missouri Klan and op- position to it. Particularly incendiary and theatrical was the anti-Catholic The Menace. Its screeds, especially against the Knights of Colum- bus (KoC), proved so popular that Aurora, Mis- souri, was said to have gotten a second rail line to ship in newsprint and ship out publications. Opponents honed counter-arguments, especially in the Catholic press, the Kansas City Call, and the Jewish Chronicle. The next three chapters concern the build- ing and triumphs over time of anti-Klan organi- zations, first in movements and then also in political coalitions. Rost especially succeeds in presenting the successes of Jewish, African Amer- ican, and Catholic organizations in answering ar- guments supporting hate. These groups, including B'nai Brith, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the KoC, the Universal Negro Improvement Associ- ation, and the Catholic Central Verein, tended to educate and mobilize separately, although broad coalitions like American Unity League came into being quickly. Politically, local coali- tions to prevent or dislodge Klan control tended to involve fragile cooperation among groups. Bey- ond the local, Klan influence had to be com- batted in both the major political parties. The most powerful anti-Klan voice, Democratic Sen- ator James Reed, illustrated the limits of coali- tion, cherishing as he did both aspirations to be President and positions alienating both feminists and African Americans. A fifth chapter drama- tizes the spectacular scandals that helped to dis- credit the Klan both nationally and in Missouri. It shows how anti-Klan forces capitalized espe- cially on exposing the sex, violence, and graft ad- hering to the KKK, and contrasting its record with its pronouncements of moral rectitude. Here Missouri proved central with Reed provid- ing leadership into sensational US Senate inves- tigations into the Klan. The best-crafted chapter in Catching Hell, the penultimate one, sits somewhat outside the struc- ture of the book. Titled "Kampaigning," it shows how some Black political leaders in Missouri ex- tended anti-Klan coalition activity to claim new expanded roles in the Democratic Party. Portray- ing the Republicans' broken promises to Black voters as amounting to "Lily-Whitism," figures like Kansas City's Dr. William Thompkins could bring anti-Klan coalition experience and claims to a moral high ground into state politics and could increasingly win Black voters to the Dem- ocrats, even outside urban political machines. Missouri became in this context a state in which, Rost argues, the Black vote switched away from Republican candidates before it did so elsewhere. Catching Hell then closes with a chapter and an epilogue detailing the fate of the Klan and Klan- like organizations in the last 90 years in Missouri. Highlights include the tracing of leading figures

in the book as they joined organizations led by new generations of bigots, including Gerald L.K. Smith and, ironically enough, the Catholic pri- est, Father Charles Coughlin. Rost's account of the rise and fall of the German-American Bund in Missouri just prior to World War Two is espe- cially acute. If there is a surprise in the book, it is the ab- sence of the left and left-led unions in the ac- counts of anti-Klan resistance. The brief mentions of such forces are made in passing, for example in the Congress of Industrial Organiza- tions appearing in lists of broad mobilizations of opposition to the German-American Bund and in accusations that such coalitions included Communists. In some cases, more might have been done to unearth left and labor participation in fighting the Klan. For example, the cross-bor- der activism of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union in the Bootheel featured defense of fellow union members taking refuge from nightrider terror in Arkansas. In St. Louis the important Communist artist Joe Jones fought a protracted, losing battle against the Klan to display radical art in the city's historic Old Courthouse in the early 1930s, as Devin Thomas O'Shea's research has shown. Whatever other small additions might be made along these lines, it must be said that the absence of the labor left in the story does not reflect lack of diligence on Rost's part. In- stead timing mattered. In the 1920s when the main action of the book unfolded, labor was rel- atively weak in Missouri and the significant con- servative forces in the anti-Klan coalition were unlikely to welcome left support. Rost's excellent work aptly shows the shape of that coalition.
--David Roediger

Wading In: Desegregation on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. By Amy Lemco. (Jackson, Mississippi: Univer-sity Press of Mississippi, 2023. Pp xii + 187, preface, acknowledgments, notes, selected bibliography, index, $22.00, paper)

For decades, the historiography of the Mis- sissippi Civil Rights Movement has prioritized the Delta region. While seminal works such as John Dittmer's Local People and Charles Payne's I've Got the Light of Freedom rightly focus on the brutal struggle for voting rights, the grassroots or- ganizing of SNCC, and the inherent violence of the plantation economy, this Delta-centrism has often obscured other, equally vital fronts in the struggle for racial justice. In Wading In: Desegrega- tion on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, Amy Lemco offers a necessary and precise corrective to this geographic imbalance. Lemco argues that the fight for recreational space, specifically the white sands of Biloxi's beaches, was a distinct Jim Crow battlefield. The legal strategy advanced by civil rights activists there hinged not merely on moral persuasion, but on the precise legal definition of public land. Lemco suggests that the Biloxi wade-ins, orches- trated by Dr. Gilbert Mason, exposed the hypoc- risy of the state's Riviera of the South narrative. By leveraging the very federal dollars used to maintain the coastline, activists transformed the economy of leisure into a weapon for change. Utilizing the detailed records of the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission (SSC), Lemco per- suasively demonstrates that local segregationists viewed this protest as an existential threat to the white supremacist order. Lemco contrasts the glittering, tourist-facing



beachfront, marketed to Northerners as a wel- coming resort destination, with the confined, under-resourced “Back-of-Town” district where Black life was legally allowed to operate (p. 6). Lemco frames the beach not merely as a natural feature, but as a commercial asset essential to the white tourism economy. Desegregation here was not just a social affront to white residents; it was perceived as an economic death threat by local elites who feared that the presence of Black beachgoers would evaporate their tourist reve- nue. Central to the narrative is Mason, an instru-mental figure in the movement. Arriving in Bi- loxi in 1955, Mason is presented as a man of science and methodical tactics. In one of the book’s most compelling anecdotes, Lemco re- counts an interaction where a police officer or- dered Mason off the beach. Calmly, Mason asked the officer to cite the specific statute prohibiting his presence. The flustered officer could not do so because no such statute existed for that spe- cific stretch of sand. As such, segregation was en- forced by custom and violence, not by law (p. 37). Mason’s strategy was to expose this legal void, forcing the state to either codify its racism, and thereby inviting federal scrutiny, or admit that its enforcement was arbitrary. Lemco excels at analyzing the forces that eventually dismantled the segregationist defense, particularly the 1947 restoration of the beach funded by a $1.5 million federal grant. She deftly argues that the acceptance of these federal funds effectively transformed the beach from private frontage into public property. Local activists un- derstood this legal vulnerability years before the Department of Justice intervened. The white homeowners’ defense in United States v.

Harrison County—that the sand pumped in by the Army Corps of Engineers was merely an addition to their private front lawns—is exposed by Lemco as a cynical attempt to socialize risk (erosion control paid for by taxes) while privatizing gain (exclusive access). While the legal arguments are technical, the description of the physical realities of the move- ment are harrowing. Lemco recounts the shift from petitioning for change to direct action, and the subsequent Bloody Wade-In of April 24, 1960. The violence is reconstructed through oral histories and police reports, but Lemco's archival work shines brightest in her discovery of a spe- cific medical report. Following an instance of mob violence where whites armed with chains and lead pipes ambushed peaceful protesters while police watched, a medical log listed the cause of injury for battered Black citizens not as assault, but as "integrational" (p. 39). This chill- ing detail mirrored the entire era: the medical and legal establishments pathologized the desire for equality as a source of physical harm, simul-

taneously absolving the perpetrators while in- criminating the victims for their own brutaliza- tion. The latter half of the book highlights the ten- sion between local leadership and national or- ganizations such as the NAACP, illustrating the Long Civil Rights Movement thesis, advanced by scholars such as Jacqueline Dowd Hall, in which locals such as Mason operated well before the cameras arrived and remained long after they left. Lemco avoids a triumphant conclusion, and instead the book closes by analyzing the relative hollowness of civil rights gains over time. Once the courts ruled that the beaches were public, the response was white flight from these spaces and the privatization of amenities. The right to relax was won, but the public support required to maintain recreational spaces evaporated the mo- ment it became truly public. Lemco's skillful integration of Mason's per- sonal papers, along with the surveillance records of the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, creates a balanced, tension-filled narrative. She writes with a narrative flair that makes this monograph suitable for general readers without sacrificing the rigor demanded by a professional audience. However, while Lemco touches on con- temporary developments, the narrative largely elides the complex socio-economic shifts of the 1970s and '80s. Specifically, the rise of the casino industry and its massive impact on Black employ- ment and coastal land use is largely absent. Nevertheless, Wading In is an essential, necessary addition to our understanding of the region's civil rights struggle. It sits comfortably alongside works like Andrew Kahrl's The Land Was Ours, reinforcing the idea that the segrega- tion of leisure spaces was a denial of humanity and a theft of public resources. Wading In serves as a reminder that the Civil Rights Movement was fought as much in the finer points of munic- ipal contracts as it was in the streets, and that ac- cess to seemingly innocuous public spaces like a beach was, in fact, a radical political demand.

--Brent Riffel

Delta Sources and Resources

Of Salt and Spirit: Black Quilters in the American South (traveling art exhibition) Mississippi Museum of Art Jackson, Mississippi by Marcus Charles Tribbett

Originally staged at the Mississippi Museum of Art in Jackson, Tennessee, from mid-No- vember of 2024 to mid-May of 2025, the Of Salt and Spirit: Black Quilters in the American South ex- hibit was recently on display at the Brooks Mu- seum of Art in Memphis through the beginning of January 2026. Curated at the Mississippi Mu- seum of Art by Sharbreon Plummer, PhD (and by Kristin Pedrozo at the Brooks Museum), the exhibit features a variety of quilts from the per- manent collection of the museum. According to the MMA's website the exhibition seeks "to illu- minate the processes and practices of Black Southern quilters and demystify cultural narra- tives assigned to their artistry while celebrating the enduring impact of quilting on communities and generations" (www.msmuseumart.org/ exhibition/of-salt-spirit/) Included among the works in the exhibition are many collected by the late Roland L. Freeman (1936-2023), photographer, author, quiltmaker, and former director of the Mississippi Folklife Project. Freeman spent decades studying the Black Quilting Tradition in the American South, gathering quilts for his collection (dozens of which were donated to the MMA) and producing two books along the way: Something to Keep You Warm: The Roland Freeman Collection of Black American Quilts from the Mississippi Heartland (1979) and A Communion of the Spirits: African American Quilters, Preservers, and Their Stories (1996). Arkansas Review editorial board member and long time contributor Professor Gregory Hansen (Folklore and Heritage Studies) paid a visit to the Brooks Museum to witness the exhibition first hand while it was on display. "I've been inter- ested in Black quilting traditions for quite some time, and Roland Freeman's book, Communion of the Spirits, is such a rich documentation and presentation of the artistry," Hansen notes. "There's an Arkansas connection," too, he points out, "as Roland was able to interview Maya Ange- lou and document her quilting." In years to come, with the quilts perma- nently housed by the MMA, admirers of this ex- quisite cultural and artistic tradition will continue to have opportunities to experience its intricacy and beauty for themselves. "I was won- dering what might have happened to his collec- tion of quilts after his passing," Professor Hansen says. "It's great to see that they're cared for and that exhibitions have been developed from them." As Arkansas Review goes to press, the next site for the Of Salt and Spirit exhibition has not been announced, but interested readers should keep an eye on the Mississippi Museum of Art's web- site to find out where it travels to next. As well, Hansen's review of the new book of the same title that coincides with the exhibition (edited by its curator Dr. Sharbreon Plummer) provides more context for understanding both the artwork and Freeman's lifelong dedication to it. It appears on the following pages.