

# Reviews

**Of Salt and Spirit: Black Quilters in the American South.** Edited by Sharbreon Plummer. (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 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 traveling exhibition that is the source of the book. "Of Salt and Spirit" symbolizes the strengths of elderly Black women, and this literary allusion is an apt representation of the creativity that is so evident 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 illustrate 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 included in the museum's recent exhibition that is traveling through the region. Freeman was a photographer 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 numerous 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 lifelong 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 associated with quilting, and his fieldnotes and selected personal papers. Freeman's impact from a lifetime of documenting and preserving the legacy of folk arts is a major element of this new volume'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-

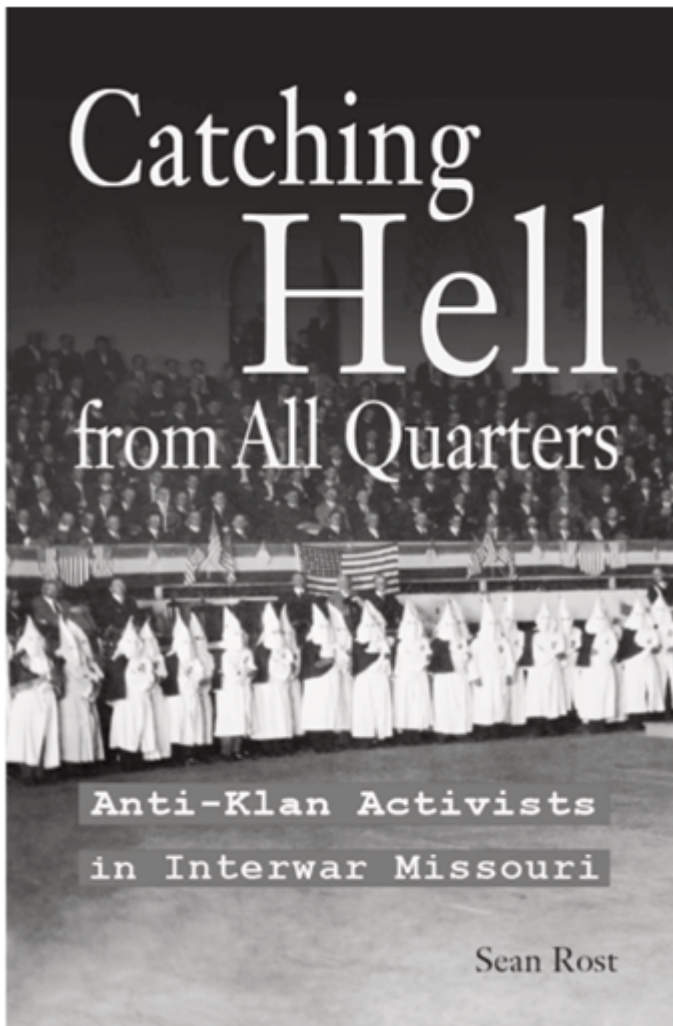
tion. Freeman was also a quilter, himself, and it is reassuring to know that his own work is valued and preserved through the museum's collection. *Of Salt and Spirit* is a beautifully crafted book. Entries by Sharbreon Plummer, Lauren Cross, and the museum's director, Betsy Bradley, introduce the volume and the art work presented between 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 developed 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 reflections 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 aesthetic values. Although most of the artists are known primarily 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 reflects the content and style of preparing the museum labels that are part of the exhibition. Those interested in more information on the artists 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 resource 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 perspective and values inherent in curating a museum exhibit. Whether or not objects can speak for themselves is a moot point, but it is clear that the editors, contributors, and designers of this wonderful publication have been inspired to create a wonderful representation of richness of expression that emerges both through historical quilts as well as in the manifestations of creative expression found in contemporary quilting. 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 obviously 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 illustrations, preface, acknowledgments, notes, bibliography, index. \$55, hardcover)

Half a lifetime ago I was researching in Chicago'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 varied 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 formations, by no means confined to the secular left or the big cities. Such groups have not gone unnoticed by historians. To tell the story of the Klan itself, as several classic studies have done, requires consideration of its frequent defeats and therefore of its opponents. Anti-fascism has occupied the attention of scholars and the fears of readers increasingly. However, for the heyday of the modern 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 authoritative history of anti-Klan coalitions in an important battleground state, one where the Klan recruited successfully and contested for political power within both the Democratic and Republican 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 history 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 important post-1945 material, the drama is very concentrated 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 beleaguered. 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 organizations. 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 capture the beginnings of the Missouri Klan and opposition to it. Particularly incendiary and theatrical was the anti-Catholic *The Menace*. Its screeds, especially against the Knights of Columbus (KoC), proved so popular that Aurora, Missouri, 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 building and triumphs over time of anti-Klan organizations, first in movements and then also in political coalitions. Rost especially succeeds in presenting the successes of Jewish, African American, and Catholic organizations in answering arguments supporting hate. These groups, including B'nai Brith, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the KoC, the Universal Negro Improvement Association, and the Catholic Central Verein, tended to educate and mobilize separately, although broad coalitions like American Unity League came into being quickly. Politically, local coalitions to prevent or dislodge Klan control tended to involve fragile cooperation among groups. Beyond the local, Klan influence had to be combatted in both the major political parties. The most powerful anti-Klan voice, Democratic Senator James Reed, illustrated the limits of coalition, cherishing as he did both aspirations to be President and positions alienating both feminists and African Americans. A fifth chapter dramatizes the spectacular scandals that helped to discredit the Klan both nationally and in Missouri. It shows how anti-Klan forces capitalized especially on exposing the sex, violence, and graft adhering to the KKK, and contrasting its record with its pronouncements of moral rectitude. Here Missouri proved central with Reed providing leadership into sensational US Senate investigations into the Klan. The best-crafted chapter in *Catching Hell*, the penultimate one, sits somewhat outside the structure of the book. Titled "Kampaigning," it shows how some Black political leaders in Missouri extended anti-Klan coalition activity to claim new expanded roles in the Democratic Party. Portraying 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 Democrats, 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 priest, 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 especially acute. If there is a surprise in the book, it is the absence of the left and left-led unions in the accounts of anti-Klan resistance. The brief mentions of such forces are made in passing, for example in the Congress of Industrial Organizations 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-border 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. Instead timing mattered. In the 1920s when the main action of the book unfolded, labor was relatively weak in Missouri and the significant conservative 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: University Press of Mississippi, 2023. Pp xii + 187, preface, acknowledgments, notes, selected bibliography, index, \$22.00, paper)

For decades, the historiography of the Mississippi 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 organizing 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: Desegregation 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, orchestrated by Dr. Gilbert Mason, exposed the hypocrisy 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 persuasively demonstrates that local segregationists viewed this protest as an existential threat to the white supremacist order. Lemco contrasts the glittering, tourist-facing



# WADING IN

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Amy Lemco



beachfront, marketed to Northerners as a welcoming 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 revenue. Central to the narrative is Mason, an instrumental figure in the movement. Arriving in Biloxi in 1955, Mason is presented as a man of science and methodical tactics. In one of the book’s most compelling anecdotes, Lemco recounts an interaction where a police officer ordered 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 specific stretch of sand. As such, segregation was enforced 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 understood 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 movement 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 specific 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 chilling 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 incriminating the victims for their own brutalization. The latter half of the book highlights the tension between local leadership and national organizations 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 moment it became truly public. Lemco's skillful integration of Mason's personal 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 contemporary 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 employment 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 segregation 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 municipal contracts as it was in the streets, and that access to seemingly innocuous public spaces like a beach was, in fact, a radical political demand.

--Brent Riffel



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