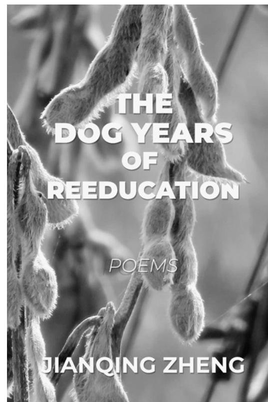
Reviews

The Dog Years of Reeducation. By Jianqing Zheng. (Lake Dallas, Texas: Madville Publishing, 2023. Pp. 84, $19.95, paperback)

When Jianqing Zheng mentions Li Po in his poem "One Winter Night" at the halfway point in his lyrically stunning and moving collection, *The Dog Years of Reeducation*, the kinship of lineage harkening back to ancient Chinese poets like Li Po and Du Fu is complete. Zheng's poems have a similar light touch, imagery, poignancy, and affinity with the seasons. As an introduction, he explains that in the Chinese Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and '70s, to answer Mao Zedong's call, millions of middle school and high school graduates, called *zhiqing*, or *educated youth*, were sent to the countryside to receive "reeducation" from poor peasants and to work and live alongside them.



Zheng was a *zhiqing* for three years in his youth and writes from memories five decades hence, still vivid and startling, those days "dog-eared" in memory. As he sweats, barehanded and barefooted, in the fields planting rice and cotton, we follow his journey from boyhood to shouldering a man's load, both physically and psychologically. Despite the separation from his family and former comforts, the arduous hours and hunger, dragging himself to and from the fields—he's a boy after all—the humor of interacting with his comrades Pigsy, Pearl, Yi, Wang, and Horse shines through. Most beautiful are his observations of nature, how he feels a part of it—the moon, the stars, the autumn night—perhaps for the first time in his life, now that it's stripped to the bare essentials, as in: "The moon peeps through broken clouds: / a marble tombstone in gray weeds."

In "After Rain," he writes, "Now on the wind, thousands of gray horses / roll away the fevered air" and "I sit on the threshold / dabbing tobacco and dusk / into the cupped paper." Simple, yet powerful, immediate images and longing for home. Though he labors long days, the world's beauty seems heightened as he observes girls picking lotus: "her lotus-picking song skimming and flapping like a great egret over the dark green lake and then soaring, hovering, flitting and swooping overhead" and catching butterflies: "It dances in pitch and yaw over the girl's head."

Especially admirable is the variation of work in *Reeducation*: imagistic and narrative poems, prose poems, and haiku, the latter two often combined as haibuns. Each is like a watercolor in time and season. At one point, Zheng contracts malaria and is taken to a hospital near his family home. Embedded in the prose poem "Sick" is this haiku of metaphoric mastery:

mom's tears
flow into the soil
of my heart
the sickbed throbs
with life

Zheng begins to see "reeducation as a coat / altered to wear, / a fate to face and / a life to

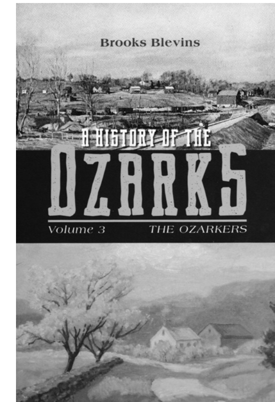
live." He questions whether this "expansive flatland" where he plants and is planted "where rain is source of life // [is] also a dreamland studded / with starry wishes?" Then, in the third section, Mao dies, a turning point in his life as well as the book, noting that he was picking cotton when the news came. The villagers still talked of fertilizer and cotton prices. In the end, he writes, "We no longer look like seedlings / and sound like strangers. // We have plowed ourselves / into the cotton fields." Something emerges in the boy sent to the countryside to labor in the fields, something like gratitude. Longing fills the fourth and last section: longing for the friends he made in good work, the soil he tilled, the rice he hand-planted that grew him as well. He looks back at the village as he leaves to rejoin his former life, "a string of my muddy footprints / running toward me."

Although set fifty years ago in a time and place foreign to many American readers of contemporary poetry, this collection remains timely in its historical value and perspective, in its humbleness of surrendering to a subsistence life and to hard knowledge gained and carried as lessons into adulthood, and in the beauty and longing captured in his spare writing. One has the feeling that Zheng has been coming to this work all of his life, and we are richer for having glimpsed these years of toil, dreams, and realizations through a poet's generous heart and eyes.

~Linda Parsons

***A History of the Ozarks, Volume 3, The Ozarkers*. By Brooks Blevins. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2021. Pp. 328, 24 b/w photographs, 18 maps, $34.95, cloth)**

In this last volume of his three-part series, *A History of the Ozarks*, the author provides a cultural and economic history of the region beginning at the turn of the nineteenth century through the present and focuses on two main themes: the duality of the region and the region's evolving culture and economy. Brooks Blevins is the author of nine books, including *Ghost of the Ozarks: Murder and Memory in the Upland South*; and *Arkansas/ Arkansaw: How Bear Hunters, Hillbillies, and Good Ol' Boys Defined a State* and is the Noel Boyd Professor of Ozarks Studies at Missouri State University.



Blevins writes history in a way that is compelling and readable, and this work is no exception. He begins and ends the book and each chapter with a story. The chapters are organized chronologically around a theme, allowing Blevins to focus on many different individuals and locations within the region. As in his other works, he frames the story of the Ozarks as a smaller part of the larger American story, explaining how the Ozarks region fits this narrative and at times also breaks away from it. Blevins notes early on that the modernization of the Ozarks coincides with the cultural push to "mythologize" the region (11). As Blevins shows readers, while the Ozarks sees railroads come and go, improved roads, the out-migration of a generation, the creation of state parks, and new immigrant populations, the public image of the region remains largely static. Blevins is able to capture how and why this image

remains relevant while also revealing many important historic events and issues that color the region's economy, culture, and population.

Blevins's first few chapters focus mostly on the late 1800s and explain the diversity of trades and farming that could be found in the Ozarks during that time; everything from cash crops like cotton and tobacco were grown as well as tomatoes, strawberries, and even grapes. He continues to explore the history of the region and its spirit of "experimentation and entrepreneurship" as he tells the story of the early roads and railroads in his third chapter (p. 59). Here he also includes some local folklore when he shares the story of John Henson, a railroad tie hacker who is compared to the legendary John Henry (p. 69).

In the latter portion of the book, Blevins focuses mostly on the history of the early 1900s, beginning with important details about the Jim Crow era and race relations, drawing from works by authors such as Kimberly Harper and Katherine Lederer, to tell the story of the expulsion of many African-American communities from the region, particularly during the early years of the Jim Crow era. Blevins also explains the impact of the Klu Klux Klan, noting that "Anti-Catholicism and nativism" were as much a part of the 1920s era Klan as was "racism" (p. 113). Blevins also notes the importance of education among the more elite Ozarkers, some of whom founded mission schools and private colleges prior to the Great Depression. This juxtaposition of attitudes and people is one example of the duality present throughout the region and how it is portrayed in the book.

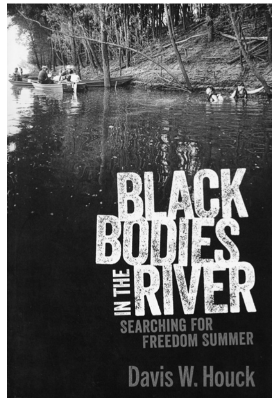
Blevins continues to explore the modern history of the Ozarks, explaining how tourism became a mainstay of the economy, especially following World War II. This led to a continuation of the idealization of the region, with tourism dedicated on pastoral landscapes and a romanticized hillbilly distinctiveness that attracted many different groups to the region from midwestern retirees to back-to-the-landers. Blevins closes out his book with the corporatization of the region as companies like Tyson and Wal-Mart founded businesses and then became powerhouses at a national level. As Blevins reports, the Waltons not only control a major portion of the economy in the region but also have considerable influence on the region's cultural offerings, noting the story of Alice Walton's efforts to create Crystal Brides. Blevins also depicts the story of contemporary immigration to the region, using the growth in the region's Hispanic and Marshallese populations as two examples. In doing so, he draws readers back to one of his main themes: change. And by placing these stories together, readers are also forced once again to reckon with the dualities of the area, which Blevins shows us in many ways throughout the work: have vs. have-not, tradition vs. progress, religious conservatism vs. live-and-let-live mentality, among others. Blevins has once again managed to deliver an important, intriguing, and relevant work about the history of the Ozark region.

~Lauren Adams Willette

Black Bodies in the River: Searching for Freedom Summer. By Davis W. Houck. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2022. Pp. xiii + 155, $25.00, paperback)

In his 2012 book, *Trauma: A Social Theory*, sociologist Jeffrey C. Alexander defines trauma

not as the individual or collective experience of events that produce suffering, but rather as the symbolic representation of those events. Trauma, he asserts, is fundamentally a narrative, one that identifies the source of suffering and assigns responsibility for it. Such a narrative naturally claims an ontological reality but is not dependent upon it; after all, many a nation has located the source of current grievances in allegations of older wrongs, in contradiction to the best work of historians, as with Germans after World War I assigning blame for their losses not upon their own leaders but, instead, upon the devious victor nations, and most consequentially upon the Jews who allegedly stabbed Germany in the back.



Most narratives of trauma are not at such deliberate variance with the prevailing historiography but, instead, slightly conflate, misremember, or misinterpret events, often to make those events accord with a more subjective experience. One such narrative lay at the heart of Davis W. Houck's *Black Bodies in the River*. Anchoring his book is the July 12, 1964, discovery, by a couple fishing in the Old River along the Mississippi-Louisiana state line, of the body of one Charles Moore, badly decomposed and missing its head. When this find was reported, authorities rushed to the site, believing that this might be the body of either Andrew Goodman, Mickey Schwerner, or James Chaney, three civil rights workers who had famously gone missing in Mississippi not long before, and who were at that point already presumed dead. The following day, divers retrieved the body of Henry Hezekiah Dee. Neither of these men were in any way connected to the Freedom Summer in Mississippi—or to any civil rights movement at all—and the case would linger unsolved for years before investigators finally determined that local Klansmen had targeted Dee specifically because his occasional travels to Chicago, combined with his frequent bandana wearing, had sparked paranoid fears that he was in league with Black Muslims to run guns to Mississippi (Moore, meanwhile, was just in the wrong place at the wrong time). After the bodies of the three Freedom Summer workers were found later that summer, national attention would swiftly focus upon them, reducing the murders of Moore and Dee largely to an historical footnote.

Except in memory, where the discovery of Moore and Dee's tortured and murdered bodies became transmuted into the claim that federal authorities had found any number of black bodies while searching for those three Freedom Summer workers. As Houck observes, "the historicity of the unnamed Black bodies in question is perhaps less the point than the critique of how the Freedom Summer has been written, filmed, and even memorialized," especially how the dominant depiction "remains largely white-on-white violence and death," given that Goodman and Schwerner were white (p. 8). And in this, memory offers a continuation of some of the resentment directed at the time toward those "elite white undergraduates from Yale and Stanford" whose "collective well-being mattered intrinsically to the federal government" and who "also had a hand in shaping the government's newfound interest in Mississippi" (p. 25)—in contrast to local black activists, who could be threatened, kidnapped, beaten, and even murdered at a whim, it seemed, without a peep from Uncle Sam. The disappearance of Moore and Dee, for example, "did not rate so much as a mention in the *Franklin Advocate*," the local newspaper, and neither "did it rate as a missing persons case to

be investigated by law enforcement" (41). Bob Moses had calculated that federal attention to civil wrongs in Mississippi would be heightened by the presence of privileged white students, and he was proven right. As Houck notes, "Had Charles Moore's body been discovered in late May or early June," before the disappearance of Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney, "we would likely not have moving images of its discovery and removal, nor of Dee's. . . . But because a massive press contingent had settled in for the duration of the search, news of the three civil rights workers' bodies being potentially discovered in the Old River promoted a frenzied response" (pp. 63–64).

The rhetorical transformation of the murders of Moore and Dee into the existence of any number of "black bodies in the river" happened early, as with the song "Here's to the State of Mississippi," penned by Phil Ochs of the SNCC Freedom Singers, a song that includes the line: "For underneath her borders, the devil draws no lines / If you drag her muddy river, nameless bodies you will find" (quoted on page 71). So while the deaths of Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney began to achieve some hagiographic status, the deaths of Moore and Dee tended to be reduced, through the years, to vague claims of "nameless bodies," as Houck discovers when he tries to chase the origin of the claim in the broader historiography, both scholarly and popular. Various histories and documentaries make an array of claims, so that, "as the fiftieth anniversary of Freedom Summer was celebrated, the claim that nine, eight, or five nameless Black bodies were discovered during the search for the missing civil rights workers seemed to have become legion among journalists, a taken-for-granted fact of Mississippi terrorism" (p. 89). The locations of these discoveries vary, too, with most centering upon the Mississippi River, while others cite the Pearl River or even the non-existent Natchez River. Some of these dubious claims have been memorialized in museum displays and even school curricula.

More than mere pedantry motivates Houck to dredge these rivers of history and memory—he is, instead, genuinely disturbed by the reduction of Moore and Dee's death to the anonymous and eponymous "Black Bodies in the River." Their lives have much to teach us about the times in which they lived, and their murders reveal much about the paranoiac mindset that drove (and still drives) opposition to equal rights for all people. Too, and this is something that Houck hints at but never develops, the story of the anonymous black bodies makes their killers seem not only competent but nigh omnipotent, while the fact remains that these murderers in Mississippi, although most often free to act with impunity, were anything but, their deeds born out of fantastical misconceptions and executed with such incompetence that prosecutors decades later could yet reconstruct events and put many of these killers behind bars. This story, too, needs to be told.

"By refusing to tell those stories," Houck writes, "by simply repeating the number—five, eight, a dozen, or bodies too numerous to count—we tacitly acknowledge that yes, nameless Black bodies—then and now—are disposable" (p. 127). If, as Martin Luther King Jr. claimed, "hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that," then it might also be true that myth cannot drive out myth. That is, the myth of countless black bodies in the river cannot drive out the myth of white supremacy—only an engagement with reality can do that. Houck's book refuses to be satisfied with the symbolic representations that, for a sociologist like Jeffrey C. Alexander, constituted the nature of trauma; instead, he goes to the heart of the events themselves. Our society needs

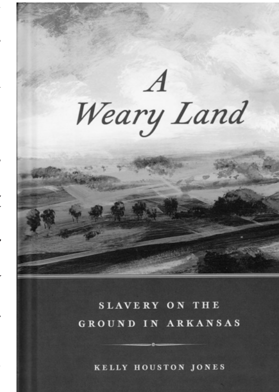
more historians and journalists dedicated to such work.

–Guy Lancaster

A Weary Land: Slavery on the Ground in Arkansas. By Kelly Houston Jones. (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2021. Pp. 268, $34.95, paperback)

The story of how slavery came to Arkansas has often been ignored by scholars who have focused instead on more established and long-standing hubs of bondage. Kelly Houston Jones's *A Weary Land: Slavery on the Ground in Arkansas* offers a welcome corrective to this neglect, tracing slavery's development in the natural state, updating and expanding our understanding of how the slave system not only impacted peoples' lives, economies, and politics, but also labor, land use, and the environment. As Jones demonstrates, slaves painstakingly cleared trees, planted crops, and remade the landscape. In the process, they connected the western edge of the South—previously a comparatively fallow hinterland—with the broader antebellum world. Slaves became the instrument of the planter class's efforts to control an unwieldy terrain, which in turn helped bind slaves to their surroundings.

A Weary Land skillfully merges environmental history with contemporary historical concepts of space, and place, and offers a nuanced depiction of slave agency and the prevailing notions of freedom in this period. Weaving analysis with personalized accounts of slaves' struggles to navigate the harsh chattel system, Jones's engrossing narrative reveals how cruel Arkansas slavery could be. Indeed, the state stood at the center of a "second slave system," in which the outer edges of the South underwent Indian removal, lands were cleared and cultivated, and slaves were forced into these areas (p. 19). The labor could could be exceedingly harsh compared to the more settled and rigid slave societies of Virginia and the Carolina Piedmont. In Arkansas, slaves toiled in these difficult conditions, but the newness and fluidity of Arkansas slavery compared to the older slave regions afforded bondspeople a surprising amount of agency and opportunity. Arkansas was a verdant environment for slave escapes and truancy, and the state's river systems provided a highway of escape and intrigue. As Arkansas slavery developed, the constant influx and outflow of slaves disrupted black family life and forced them to improvise new relationships and hierarchies within their communities. According to Jones, multi-generational slave families living together in one place were uncommon, and slaves grew accustomed to reforming kinship networks. This phenomenon was true elsewhere in the antebellum South, but Jones convincingly argues that the hinterland nature of Arkansas uniquely required slaves there to forge a sense of home and community in the "wild spaces between farms and fields" (p. 205). The forests and brush served as conduits for news and gossip, and the inherent challenges of living in bondage on a frontier gave slaves' lives meaning despite their misery.



Prior to the publication of *A Weary Land*, Orville Taylor's formative, but often overlooked monograph, *Negro Slavery in Arkansas*, marked the

only statewide study of Arkansas slavery. To be sure, in subsequent decades a wealth of journal articles has informed our understanding of these histories, but compared to other states, Arkansas's slavery historiography has been relatively thin, and few scholars have undertaken book-length examinations on this topic, much less in a comprehensive manner as Taylor attempted. Jones, while making no claim to have undertaken an exhaustive examination, has nevertheless written a continuation of some of the themes Taylor set out to explore. Building on and synthesizing the insights of Taylor, as well as more contemporary Arkansas scholars such as Thomas DeBlack, Jeannie Whayne, Morris Arnold, Carl Moneyhon, and many others, Jones opens a window into how the formation of cultures, resistance, and endurance of slaves built over time, just as they were constructing the very system—and hewing the land—that bound them.

As Jones notes, recovering the individual stories of slaves' lives not only adds depth to our knowledge of slavery's burdens, but it also adds to the growing body of research on the autonomy of slaves. By portraying the experiences of slaves from their own perspectives, *A Weary Land* represents precisely the kind of "from-the-ground-up" history Arkansas studies have sorely needed. Again, much work has been undertaken in this area in shorter form (including work by Jones herself), but this book will serve as an important building block for newcomers to Arkansas history, and a reference point for scholars of the Old South, especially its margins.

A Weary Land also reveals how slavery in Arkansas differed from how it was practiced in other regions. The state was "a speculator's dream and a trafficker's paradise," as its untapped soil, and remote location essentially outside the reach of federal oversight, attracted opportunists seeking to capitalize on a region whose soil had not yet been depleted by years of cotton cultivation (p. 204). The experiences of nineteenth century slaves in the state in some ways mirrored that of seventeenth century bondspeople in the eastern slave territories, where planters relied on slaves to cultivate existing farmland while simultaneously clearing new ground. Arkansas slaves in the antebellum era were almost always brought there from another part of the South, and Jones is particularly adept at exposing the constant mobility and uncertainty they were forced to endure. Slaves were continually pushed further into the fringes of the region well into the Civil War, wrecking family life and health. According to Jones, after emancipation black Arkansans were often quite capable of picking up and making new lives for themselves, in part because so many had already done so due to the constant movement of slaves into the area.

A Weary Land concludes with evocative accounts of how, in the postbellum era, former slaves managed to establish new roots, establish families, and construct livelihoods. However, the end of Reconstruction and the onset of Jim Crow restrictions made this exceedingly difficult, and ultimately led many to join the Great Migration out of the South altogether. In fact, many former slaves in Arkansas fared poorly in the post-Civil War period, preyed upon by debt peonage and predatory landowners who sought to bilk freed people of what little land and autonomy they could carve out for themselves. Despite these challenges, Arkansas was portrayed by boosters as an ideal locale in which black farmers might resettle, especially those frustrated with the restrictions imposed in other areas. Ironically, over 250,000 black farmers came to the state between the end of the Civil War and the outbreak of World War I, many making the journey on foot, undoubtedly in search of the relative freedom they were told Arkansas could provide. As

Jones points out, their hopes often wilted in the harsh light of reality they encountered. An important work of scholarship that adds new insights into the history of slavery in Arkansas, *A Weary Land* is an impressive, compelling achievement that future researchers will draw upon as an indispensable resource.

~Brenton E. Riffel

My Back Pages: The Teresa Poems. By Floyd Collins. (Nacogdoches, Texas: Stephen F. Austin State University Press, 2022. Pp. 80, author's note, about the author, $18.00, paperback)

Brooding and nostalgic, *My Back Pages: The Teresa Poems* offers a view at the imperfect rendering of memory and the grief that spills out from recounting it. Reading the collection is like walking through a gallery of an artist's personal work: obsessions are mined, loves are fantastically illuminated, all the while the artist himself admitting that this is a conjuring.

A graduate of the University of Arkansas's MFA and Doctoral programs, Collins alludes to his time in Fayetteville throughout the collection, and the influence of classical Greek and Roman mythology flavors the recounting of the speaker's life.

Opening on an apparition, the speaker of Collins's poem "Expiation" depicts Teresa as an "almost nightly visitation / that frequents troubled sleep, defying / All wakeful attempts to exorcise the memories / Of what receded so long ago. It remains, / That brief season that transpired in another age" (p. 1). Yet, she is not the one who won't leave the speaker's mind be. Again and again, Collins alludes to the speaker conjuring her image, her symbolic meaning, how she has shaped the speaker's life.

In an almost stream-of-conscious conception of images, Collins's poems blend into one another the way the shading of one memory brings out the color in another. The speaker's life is colored not only by his love for Teresa, but love of youth, family, Memphis, the search for creative greatness. The emerald grass of ball diamonds in "Narcissus To The Muse" blends into the broken glass of beer bottles in "Two Parables." The colors of oak leaves and tree lines burst pyrotechnic in "Farewell" and "December, 1978," each calling back to Teresa's aneurysm and the pain of a that place to which we can never return. This blending of images resembles a speaker's mind wandering through his life, grasping at memory only to lose the thread and be drawn to another image recovered from oblivion.

These are not only love poems to Teresa, but poems about the grief of losing her and the speaker losing himself. Images of a girl in pleated skirts and gypsy shag haircuts give way to an older man drinking heavily as the night winds down: "Slings of Grand Marnier, and, the blue pilot light / In my brain turned low, I mounted the stairs to / Dark chambers where you still wait for all I know" (p. 25).

And at the close of the collection, there isn't any real sense that the speaker is done digging up the bones of lost love and youth. "Lyrics had more to do with a potter's wheel—'Truth is /

Beauty, / beauty, truth'—than some forgotten DJ's Turntable. Draw the curtain, Teresa" (p. 69): The final lines of "Nights on the Delta" further give a sense that the speaker is asking for the memories to stop because he cannot stop going back to them. The artist has to mine his life for work and whether it's a Beatles song, Elvis, or nights on the Mississippi Delta, the sound is not Rock 'n' Roll and the smell is not honeysuckle: it is all Teresa. She is muse and specter.

Pretty as a picture and painful as a mirror, these poems are a reflection of the stories we tell ourselves as the years going by become decades. The sweet haze of these memories reveals a greater vulnerability of a speaker living alone, drinking often, and caught in the grasp of should have, could have been. If you are a reader who has ever found yourself conjuring up memories like a DJ who won't let go of fifty-year-old hits, you'll find yourself in these poems. You might even find that these poems act like a sad country song or singing the blues, where embracing the pain helps heal the wound.

--D.C. Eichelberger