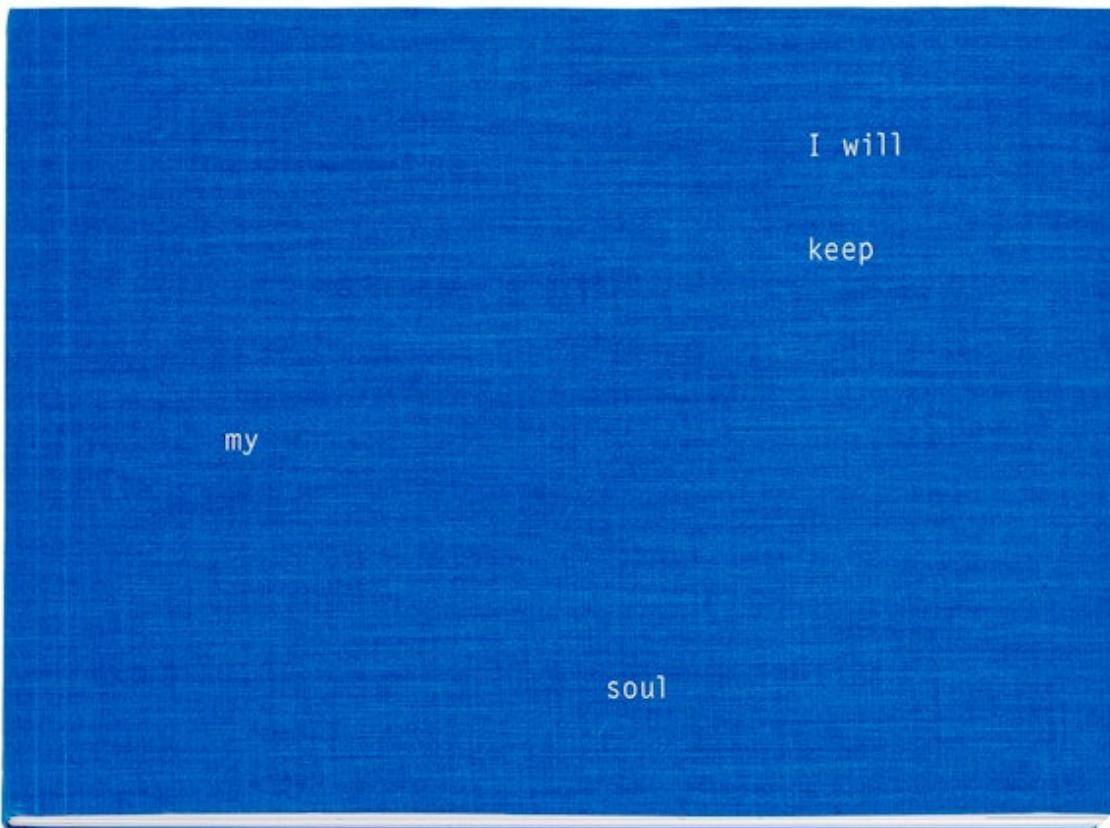


## Art Books

Helen Cammock's *I Will Keep My Soul*

This multifaceted book brings together poems, historical documents, photographs, and archival documents to reclaim the archive as a space for creative reflection.

By Briana Ellis-Gibbs



Helen Cammock, *I Will Keep My Soul* (Siglio, 2023)

The focal point of Helen Cammock's *I Will Keep My Soul* is artist Elizabeth Catlett's monument to Louis Armstrong, which took seven years to create. Catlett was exiled from America as a result of her communist activism and her artwork, which advocated against the actions of the United States government. Louis Armstrong, like Catlett, put his career on the line to speak out against injustices in the US, such as Arkansas's failure to integrate Central High School in September 1957. *I Will Keep My Soul* brings together materials related to the Armstrong monument, montages of poems, historical documents related to Catlett and other influential Black artists, quotes from Catlett's 1961 book *The Negro Art and American Art*, and

archival images taken by Cammock to illustrate the past, present, and future challenges Black people fight against due to the government's discriminatory laws in Southern America.

The book's title comes from the article of the same name (reproduced in facsimile in the book) by James Farmer, co-founder of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), which details the bravery of freedom riders who rode interstate buses into the segregated Southern United States in 1961. *I Will Keep My Soul* was created alongside an exhibition of the same name in collaboration with Rivers Institute for Contemporary Art & Thought in New Orleans and the California African American Museum in Los Angeles, to encourage the use of the archives at the Amistad Research Center by artists and non-scholars. As curator Andrea Andersson writes in the book, "While archives have long been sites for the collection and preservation of material history, the work to see their holding circulate widely in new shapes, alternative narratives and untrained hands is more recent." Cammock uses Farmer's article from these archives to underscore the relevance of previous discussions of the Civil Rights movement around "outsiderness" (Cammock, as a British artist, is herself something of an outsider to Americanness) and the larger relevance of racial struggles, as government officials currently strip Black History curriculum from classrooms today. "It is not only that Southerners and other Americans have been shaken in their unjust racial practices, or out of their lethargy," Farmer writes. The Freedom Rides offered "a new, more constructive approach to America's racial dilemma." With the titular reference, Cammock seeks to shake readers out of their lethargy.



The various writings in the book, from poetry to fictional stories and historical letters (many from the Amistad Research Center's archive), give first-hand accounts of the racist experiences Black people undergo. In her poetry, Cammack spaces out phrases and words allowing the reader to pause and digest each sentence. "The streets are jumping [space] electric smiles and [space] fries [space] and children's eyes [space] you take the space [space] you glide [space] you jump." The spaces create a visual experience for the reader, both sensational and emotional. Jordan Amirkhani's story, "All Water Has a Perfect Memory," is shaped like a river, vibrantly enhancing the content about the Mississippi River as a connecting body that has itself been marked by colonization and transformation over the years. A December 4, 1976 letter to Catlett

(Mrs. Mora) from a young artist named Bonnie McCall asks for advice, “As you well know being an artist is quite difficult, but being a Black female artist is one continuous battle.” The letter is reproduced on transparent paper followed by archival black-and-white images of Catlett working on the Armstrong monument, a process that included many personal and financial struggles. The letter and photos bleed together through the transparent paper, developing a dialogue between photographs and historical records that connects writings to images.

This arrangement of images in the book sparks a captivating connection between past and present. Cammock’s own serene photographs of the Mississippi River in 2023 and historical newspaper clippings telling stories about the search for deceased Civil Rights activists in it, create a jarring juxtaposition, encouraging reflection on the previous and present ways Black Americans have to fight for their human rights. The newspaper clippings tell stories of the murder of CORE members. By incorporating archival materials, Cammock underscores the critical role of journalism in creating collective memory and ensuring future generations possess knowledge of the past, and reclaims the archive as a space for creative reflection.

In February 2023, the Mississippi House of Representatives in Jackson approved a bill that would create a new district where the local political officials would be hand-picked by two white judges, resulting in a diminished voice for Black communities in the majority-Black city. This casts Cammock’s photos of the river in a new light. Putting historical and present-day photos in conversation creates a captivating narrative that prompts readers to contemplate ongoing injustices impacting Black Americans.

Cammock opens each section of the book with a quote from Catlett (such as, “Art is, and has always been, an expression of the historic condition of people and should be part of humanity’s wealth”), in white typeface against black paper, and spreads images of her sculptures and prints throughout. But the book does not provide detailed accounts of Catlett’s struggles to create her Armstrong monument. This only comes through in the snippets of correspondence reproduced from the Amistad Research Center archives. The documentation of Catlett’s work challenges people to rethink how records can capture struggles with race and identity, and how their use can prevent future struggles. Helen Cammock’s *I Will Keep My Soul* illustrates how critical it is to document these hardships, and how creatives can make use of these archives.

## **Contributor**

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