Containing Disaster and Describing the Displaced: 
The Mississippi Flood of 1927

by

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Introduction

A placard atop the Greenville, Mississippi levee explains the creation of the Flood Control Act of 1928 and the implementation of the Mississippi River and Tributaries Project after the Flood of 1927. The statement concludes: “The MR&T Project was successful in containing the record 2011 Flood.” (Photo by author, August 2016)

Greenville, Mississippi (population 34,400) is one of the many quiet towns situated on the banks of the Mississippi River. If you drive down Greenville’s Main Street, then up an abrupt hill (in what is an otherwise flat landscape), and turn left at the riverside casino entrance, you can park on a formidable gradient and proceed to launch your boat or fish from the bank. This small hill is, in fact, a levee, carpeted in green on the side facing town and rough stone on the river-facing slope. You will find a sea of parking spots in the vast space between the top of the levee and the flowing river. When I visited the levee in August 2016, the Mississippi looked lazy, flat, and brown. For such an unintimidating waterway, the massive levee seemed a bit over-
the-top. But then I noticed the unobtrusive reminders of when the river overtopped its banks. There are a few placards planted at the top of the levee that announce the history of a mighty flood. And nestled in the levee itself is a ladder of metal signs, each noting an historic watermark with a height and date. Such memorials are quiet evidence of one of the nation’s greatest environmental disasters.

The town of Greenville, which is situated in the area known as the Mississippi Delta, was one of the epicenters of the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 (hereafter the “Flood of 1927,” or just the “Flood”). In late April of 1927, Greenville’s Main Street was underwater. Floodwaters would eventually claim nearly 26,000 square miles in seven states bordering the Mississippi River. The Flood of 1927 endures as a watershed moment in the environmental, economic, political, and cultural history of the United States. In addition, the physical legacy of the Flood, or more specifically the river engineering projects inspired by the Flood, also have contributed to contemporary flooding disasters, like Hurricane Katrina and the submersion of parts of lower Louisiana. Levees and memorials like the ones in Greenville are noteworthy reminders of the Flood’s continued relevance, but this thesis is more concerned with the less tangible social, visual, and linguistic legacies of the Flood. This thesis broadly explores issues of narrative containment and representation in the wake of the Mississippi Flood of 1927. Establishing a narrative frame and responding to the “meaning of a disaster as well as the materiality of it” is an important task for public officials and observers.¹ In the spirit of framing, this introduction will provide a profile of the Mississippi River, some relevant historical and regional context,

background about the Flood, an inventory of previous scholarship about the Flood, and finally, the analytical framework for this thesis, drawing particularly from disaster studies literature.

**Figure 1.1** “The Mississippi River and Its Tributaries.” A rendering from the National Geographic Society of the Mississippi River’s nervous system-like drainage basin, which encompasses 1,245,000 square miles in 31 states and 2 Canadian provinces. (From American National Red Cross. *The Mississippi Valley Flood Disaster of 1927; Official Report on the Relief Operations*, (Washington DC: American National Red Cross, 1929), 3.)

**A Brief Biography of the Mississippi River**

Starting as a small stream in Minnesota, the Mississippi River (hereafter the “Mississippi,” or simply the “River”) expands and winds 2,340 miles through ten states before filtering through the Mississippi River Delta and opening into the Gulf of Mexico.² The Mississippi and its many tributaries drain 31 states and 2 Canadian

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provinces, in a basin that spans nearly 1,245,000 square miles. The Mississippi, the largest river in North America, carries many millions of tons of sediment annually, delivering some of that to the Gulf, but depositing much of the dirt along its journey.

Before human intervention, the Mississippi meandered, depositing loads of sediment in the Lower Valley. For millennia, the pace and width of the river sustained vast wetlands, or as historian Christopher Morris explains in *The Big Muddy*, “land and water freely mixed.” The meandering River fed rich ecosystems of lakes, swamps, and wetlands that in turn supported a diversity of species. Native Americans, principally the Mississippians, who took advantage of the rich soils along the river for crops, and the Plaquemines, who subsisted by “hunting, fishing, and gathering from the abundant wetlands of the lower valley” called the Mississippi Valley home for thousands years before Europeans arrived. Archeological evidence suggests that Native Americans settled the Mississippi River banks as early as 7,000 years ago. While really, it shouldn’t matter who the first European person to see it was, most histories of the Mississippi River claim that it was Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto and his troops who laid eyes on the River on May 8, 1541. Over the next five centuries, Europeans developed settlements along the Mississippi and took advantage

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3 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 10.
8 Ibid., 14.
9 Ibid., 2.
10 Ibid., 9.
of the river for commerce. The Mississippi River became a vital transportation artery, particularly with the advent of the steamship in the early nineteenth century, which enabled the swift passage of passengers and freight up and down the river.\textsuperscript{11} The history of the Mississippi River deserves more than a paragraph, and indeed, over the centuries, it has been the subject of numerous books, scientific reports, poems, songs, and tweets. In the opening line of \textit{Life on the Mississippi} (1883), Mark Twain says it best: “The Mississippi River is well worth reading about.” \textsuperscript{12}

While the Mississippi River and its rich economic and cultural history is certainly worth many more pages, this thesis is more concerned with the times when the Mississippi overtopped its banks, which was a historically frequent occurrence.\textsuperscript{13} Many Native Americans in the Lower Valley opted to “adapt[] to the wetland environment” rather than attempt to make the region drier.\textsuperscript{14} The flooding was regular and regenerative, delivering rich sediment to the Lower Mississippi River Valley.

Author Toni Morrison offers her elegant, literary assessment of the flooding:

\begin{quote}
You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. "Floods" is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

As she observes, flooding really became an issue when residents and commercial interests sought to keep the River in place. Over the millennia, the Mississippi,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} Louis C. Hunter, \textit{Steamboats on the Western Rivers: An Economic and Technological History} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949).
\item \textsuperscript{12} Mark Twain, \textit{Life on the Mississippi} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 21.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Morris, \textit{The Big Muddy: An Environmental History of the Mississippi and Its Peoples, from Hernando De Soto to Hurricane Katrina}, 7.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 17.
\end{itemize}
Twain’s “crookedest river,”\textsuperscript{16} meandered its course, but since the mid-19\textsuperscript{th} century, it has been engineered thoroughly.

Hoping to quell flooding and to promote commerce, American engineers set out to tame the River. Plans to build a levee heavy management system along the Mississippi River began at least as early as the 1840s.\textsuperscript{17} Seeking to protect the “cotton and sugar empire” in the Lower Mississippi Valley from devastating flooding, the Corps of Topographical Engineers (later merged with Army Corps of Engineers in 1863) conducted a comprehensive Mississippi Delta Survey, which was released in 1861.\textsuperscript{18} In “Delaying the Deluge: The Engineering Debate over Flood Control on the Lower Mississippi River,” George Pabis explains that “after the Mississippi Delta Survey, military engineers became an integral part of the national discussion concerning the role of the federal government in internal improvements along the country's waterway.”\textsuperscript{19} The Great Flood of 1927 would again spotlight the debate about the role of government in flood management and control. In his book \textit{Rising Tide}, widely considered the most significant history of the Flood of 1927, author John Barry spends considerable time describing the tensions between engineers Andrew A. Humphreys and James Buchanan Eads, who competed to implement their engineering designs for the Mississippi River in the 1870s.\textsuperscript{20} Though George Pabis critiques the timeline of Barry’s analysis, both scholars agree that “Neither [Humphreys nor Eads] tolerated dissent” and, ultimately, it was “[t]his arrogance [that] permeated the corps

\textsuperscript{16} Twain, \textit{Life on the Mississippi}, 21.
\textsuperscript{17} George S. Pabis, "Delaying the Deluge: The Engineering Debate over Flood Control on the Lower Mississippi River," \textit{Journal of Southern History} 64, no. 3 (1998): 425.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 423.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 423.
as well as the civil engineering profession and led to an almost exclusive reliance on levees throughout the Delta, with tragic consequences for people living along the river during the great flood of 1927.\textsuperscript{21} The enthusiastic engineering of the River in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries and the confidence in the “levees-only” management scheme reflected the technological optimism (or hubris) of the day.

\textbf{Figure 1.2.} A depiction of the historic “Meander Belt” of the Mississippi River. (Map by Harold Fisk, "Mississippi River Meander Belt: Cape Girardeau, Mo-Donaldsville, La." In \textit{Mississippi River Alluvial Valley Ancient Courses}, Plate 22, Sheet 7 1944. Accessed March 2, 2017, \url{http://lmvmapping.erdc.usace.army.mil/index.htm})

\textsuperscript{21} Pabis, "Delaying the Deluge: The Engineering Debate over Flood Control on the Lower Mississippi River," 425.
The Early Twentieth Century in the United States

The first quarter of the twentieth century saw advances in film, radio, and automobile technology. The early twentieth century also saw divergent understandings of nature and tensions about the role of science as reflected in incidents like the Scopes Trial of 1925. The First World War (1914-1918) rocked the globe, and Woodrow Wilson’s “Fourteen Points” and League of Nations changed diplomacy. In the first two decades, the United States welcomed around 15 million mostly European immigrants (legislation like the Chinese Exclusion Act barred many seeking entry on the Pacific Coast), who settled in cities like New York and Chicago.\textsuperscript{22} There were internal demographic changes as well, most notably the beginnings of what would become known as the “Great Migration,” as hundreds of thousands of African Americans left the rural Southern states for Northern and Western cities. Immigrants working in cities were often subjected to crowded living quarters and hazardous workplace conditions, which some Progressives sought to remedy with social engineering and activism. The “Progressive Era” (roughly 1890 the late 1920s) broadly describes the period of activist efforts seeking labor, urban, social, political, and education reforms among other initiatives like women’s suffrage and prohibition. Women finally gained the right to vote in 1920 with the ratification of the 19\textsuperscript{th} amendment, though Jim Crow era voting restrictions in many Southern states meant that it was mostly white women who enjoyed this suffrage. In the 1920

\textsuperscript{22} U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, "Immigration, by Leading Country or Region of Last Residence: 1901 to 1997," vol. 119, Statistical Abstract of the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 1999), 872.
census, the number of people living in cities finally surpassed the population living in rural areas.\textsuperscript{23}

Unlike her more industrial counterparts in the North, the South remained largely rural through the early twentieth century. Though the Union’s victory in the Civil War had legally ended slavery, in the place of slavery emerged labor arrangements like sharecropping and tenant farming that kept many black Southerners in poverty.\textsuperscript{24} Many of the Reconstruction promises (like “40 acres and a Mule”) went unfulfilled, quickly snubbed by a fumbling and unsympathetic Johnson Administration. W.E.B Du Bois famously observed of Reconstruction: “The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery.”\textsuperscript{25}

Jim Crow laws and \textit{de jure} segregation meant that by the 1920s, many African Americans in the South remained economically depressed and oppressed. Such disenfranchisement was particularly amplified in the “Mississippi Delta.”

While the Great Flood of 1927 affected seven states, and actually displaced the highest volume of people in Arkansas, the damage was particularly spectacular in the Mississippi Delta. The “Mississippi Delta”\textsuperscript{26} describes the almond-shaped region between the Mississippi and Yazoo rivers in the northwestern corner of the state of Mississippi. Its position between two rivers made the Delta fertile and ripe for

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{23}“Urban and Rural Areas,” United States Census Bureau, \url{https://www.census.gov/history/www/programs/geography/urban_and_rural_areas.html}.
\item \textsuperscript{24}Isabel Wilkerson, \textit{The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration}, vol. 1st (New York: Random House, 2010), 37.
\item \textsuperscript{26}The Mississippi Delta is not to be confused with the Mississippi River Delta, which describes where the Mississippi River opens (in a “Bird’s Foot” pattern) to the Gulf of Mexico.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
In the 18th century, the French established sugar and rice cultivation in the region. Eli Whitney’s cotton gin (1793) helped to revive the moribund cotton industry in the South, and the Mississippi Delta became an epicenter of cotton production, on the backs of enslaved people. Historian James Cobb described the region as “the most Southern place on earth,” in his 1992 book, which bears that description as its title.⁷ James C. Cobb, _The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity_ (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 5.

Cobb quotes sociologist Rupert Vance who observed in 1935: "Cotton obsessed, Negro obsessed,” elaborating, “Nowhere but in the Mississippi Delta are antebellum conditions so nearly preserved,” referencing the labor regime and racial stratification.⁹ By the 1920s, in the Delta, 95% of tenant farmers were African American, and because tenant farmers did not own the land on which they labored, they were often vulnerable to “unscrupulous planters,” who maintained a system that “mired the tenant in year-to-year debt,” making it extraordinarily difficult for tenants to extricate themselves from the debt or the land.³¹

It should be noted that the Mississippi Delta was not entirely a biracial society when the Flood bowled through. There were no small number of Chinese Americans who had moved to the Delta in the wake of the Civil War, when plantation owners sought cheaper labor, and they have a long and rich history in the region.³² Vivian Wu Wong, "Somewhere between White and Black: The Chinese in Mississippi," _OAH Magazine of History_ 10, no. 4 (1996): 34.

An unknown number of Mexicans, who had come to work as cotton farmers, also called

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²⁸ Ibid., vii.
²⁹ Ibid., 153, 183.
³⁰ Ibid., 99.
³³ See also The Mississippi Delta Chinese Heritage Museum. Delta State University, Charles W. Capps, Jr. Archives & Museum building, 3rd floor. Cleveland, MS.
Mississippi home.\textsuperscript{34} Chinese and Mexican Americans living in Mississippi experienced the Flood of 1927,\textsuperscript{35} and focusing on the anti-black racism that pervaded the flood relief efforts in some places in this thesis is not without acknowledging that other ethnic groups were affected.

The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927

To start the history of the Mississippi Flood of 1927 with the first raindrops would be inaccurate. As discussed above, decades of engineering had bounded many stretches of the river with levees on either side. And the agricultural and residential development in the Mississippi Lower Valley flood plain also left many communities in harm’s way. These oversimplified pre-conditions (the levees-only river management strategy, commercial-environmental history of logging, and human settlement) meant that one needed to “just add water” for a disaster. And in the fall of 1926 and spring of 1927, the skies added water. A lot of water. In late August of 1926, in the central part of the United States: “heavy rain began to fall. Rain pelted first Nebraska, South Dakota, Kansas and Oklahoma, then edged eastward into Iowa and Missouri, then Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky and Ohio.”\textsuperscript{36} Over the next several months, the rains continued to fall steadily at times and in storm bursts, generating several floods and killing dozens in different incidences.\textsuperscript{37} The rains filled the Mississippi River and “On New Year's Day; the Mississippi itself went above flood

\textsuperscript{34} American National Red Cross, \textit{The Mississippi Valley Flood Disaster of 1927; Official Report on the Relief Operations} (Washington, DC: The American Red Cross, 1929), 58.
\textsuperscript{35} Joe Ting, interview by Jerry Young, February 16, 1977.
\textsuperscript{36} John M. Barry, "After the Deluge: As Hurricane Katrina Made Clear, the Lessons of the Mississippi Flood of 1927 Have yet to Be Learned," (Smithsonian Institution, 2005).
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
stage at Cairo, Illinois, and would stay above flood stage for 153 consecutive days.”

Good Friday of 1927 brought an awe-inspiring amount of rain (“6 to 15 inches over 100,000 square miles”) across much of the central and southern United States.

And because engineers had opted for a levees-only management strategy, which created a “trough” of sorts, the water continued to fill the River, unable to find outlets. Because by the 1920s, there was still no federal relief or disaster response agency, and because the federal government refused to disburse funds, the American Red Cross led the relief efforts. Before the devastation reached the Mississippi Delta, the crest moved in slow motion down the River in March and April, inundating portions of Illinois, Missouri and Arkansas as it traveled. Local chapters of the Red Cross worked to respond to the needs of these areas while organizing for the Flood as it marched farther south. Before the flood relief efforts became a national affair in late April, the Red Cross was already tending to 75,000 people displaced by the floodwaters in Illinois, Missouri and Arkansas while preparing for more emergencies in Kentucky, Tennessee, and Mississippi. And the crest of the Flood continued to roll South. As the rains fell and the river swelled, black men were conscripted to pile sandbags in a desperate (and ultimately futile) attempt to hold back the water. The 21st of April, 1927 proved to be a fateful day: a titanic crevasse (breach) opened in the Mounds Landing levee (in Bolivar County, Mississippi and across the river from Arkansas City), after which “things would never

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38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
42 Ibid., 23.
be the same again.” The crevasse at Mounds Landing, which would be the largest during the flood, unleashed “468,000 second-feet of water onto the Delta.”

According to an April 22, 1927 article in the *Memphis Commercial-Appeal*, at Mounds Landing: “Thousands of [black] workers were frantically piling sandbags…when the levee caved. It was impossible to recover the bodies,” or to get an accurate death toll. The floodwaters gushed and rushed through the opening and filled the surrounding region, covering much of the Delta in several feet of water and displacing thousands of people.


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43 Barry, *Rising Tide*, 201.


45 Barry, *Rising Tide*, 203.

46 Ibid., 202.
On April 22nd, President Calvin Coolidge issued a statement explaining the scope of disaster and calling upon the nation to donate funds to the relief effort.\textsuperscript{47} The President also appointed the Mississippi Flood Commission comprised of several men from his cabinet, including: “Herbert Hoover, Secretary of Commerce; Dwight D Davis, Secretary of War; Curtis B Wilbur, Secretary of the Navy; Andrew Mellon, Secretary of the Treasury; and William Jardine, Secretary of Agriculture.”\textsuperscript{48} On April 22nd, the Committee, along with several military officials and James L. Fieser, acting Chairman of American Red Cross, convened at the Red Cross National Headquarters in Washington, DC. They discussed how to communicate the gravity of the Mississippi Flood Disaster to other headquarters and established a fundraising goal of $5,000,000 for initial relief efforts.\textsuperscript{49} Over the course of the summer, as the floodwaters continued to linger, that fundraising goal would nearly triple. The following day, James Fieser, now Red Cross Director of Field Operations; Herbert Hoover, who had been elected the chairman of the Committee; and Major General Jadwin, the Chief of Engineers of the U.S Army, traveled to the newly designated Red Cross Headquarters in Memphis, Tennessee to continue organizing the flood relief operations, which are detailed in Chapter One.\textsuperscript{50}

This was not the first, and certainly not the last, flood of the Mississippi River, but it would be the largest recorded up until that time. It has since been surpassed in total acreage submerged by the Flood of 1993. The levees-only policy, which engineers promised would be able to contain the Mighty Mississippi, had failed.

\textsuperscript{47} American National Red Cross, \textit{The Mississippi Valley Flood Disaster of 1927; Official Report on the Relief Operations}, 12.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 24.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 13.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 24.
mightily. Ultimately, the River crevassed 145 levees, and claimed 16,570,627 acres or nearly 26,000 square miles with muddy floodwaters.\textsuperscript{51} By the time the waters stilled, the Mississippi had, according to the Red Cross, claimed 246 lives (many experts believe this to be a conservative estimate) and displaced over 630,000 people, many of whom would be cared for by American Red Cross relief camps.\textsuperscript{52} The Flood killed over a million livestock and stranded many more cows, pigs, dogs, and horses. Muddy waters submerged homes, businesses, and 5,289,576 acres of crops.\textsuperscript{53} And when the floodwaters finally retreated in the summer months, they did not just leave watermarks on homes, but also a profound influence on the political, physical, and social landscape of the United States.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image}
\caption{An Army Corps of Engineers photograph of “The levee at Arkansas City served as a refugee camp[…],” near Mounds Lounding.\textsuperscript{54} Though difficult to make out, the white structures dotting the levees are tents. (From Pete Daniel. \textit{Deep'n as It Come: The 1927 Mississippi River Flood} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 30.)
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 6.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
Aftermath: Political and Engineering Legacy

The Flood of 1927 marked a turning point in federal policy, inspiring the swift creation and approval\(^5^5\) of the Flood Control Act of 1928, which tasked the federal government with a larger role in flood management, through the Army Corps of Engineers.\(^5^6\) The Flood Control Act of 1928, which authorized $325 million in project spending,\(^5^8\) has been interpreted by scholars as “setting a precedent for widespread federal involvement in what had long been perceived as the primarily local affair of flood prevention, [and…] marked a paradigm shift in the division of labor among federal, state and local governments.”\(^5^9\) President Coolidge, a small government conservative, who had refused to appropriate government funds for the flood relief, reluctantly signed the bill. The Flood, in some ways, also made conditions ripe for Coolidge’s successor. Coolidge had been rather removed from relief operations, but Herbert Hoover, Secretary of Commerce at the time of the Flood, involved himself heavily in the crisis as a Chairman of the Mississippi Flood Commission.\(^6^0\) Through numerous carefully orchestrated visits to flood-ravaged areas, posed photographs among children in the relief camps, and many fundraising appeals, Hoover emerged as the visible leader of relief efforts and, in the eyes of many, a “hero.”\(^6^1\) Having cultivated positive publicity, in part by downplaying


\(^5^6\) 1928 Flood Control Act, Seventieth Congress, Sess. I. Ch. 596. (1928)


\(^5^9\) Klein and Zellmer, Mississippi River Tragedies: A Century of Unnatural Disaster, 78.

\(^6^0\) Barry, Rising Tide, 287.

accusations of discrimination in the camps and lying about death tolls, Hoover rode the wave of favorability garnered during the relief operations straight to the White House in 1928.

The Flood Control Act of 1928 authorized funds to support the construction of “spillways,” ‘floodways,’ and reservoirs to replicate the flood-taming functions of natural floodplains.”62 The Mississippi River and Tributaries Project heavily engineered the River to protect residents and promote commerce.63 Despite this engineering, the Mississippi has still flooded several times, notably in 1936, 1965 and 1993. While not entirely effective in preventing all flooding, the containment of the River has been perhaps too successful in preventing the flow of sediment to the Mississippi River Delta, which has undermined the ability of the wetlands to absorb hurricanes and has hastened the subsidence of coastal lands in the area. 64 In this sense, the Flood of 1927 has a physical connection to contemporary flooding disasters like Hurricane Katrina and the submersion of lower Louisiana.

**Aftermath: Social and Cultural Legacy**

In addition to influencing federal policy and the shape of the Mississippi River, the Flood of 1927 rendered visible the strained race relations in the Deep South. As explored at length in Chapter 2, many in the “black press” spoke out against the violent conscription of black flood victims for un-and under-paid work on the levees before the flood and maintenance work after the flood, and condemned the

racial discrimination in the relief camps. The mistreatment in relief camps, in the words of John Barry, was "the final reason" for many Southern African Americans, who had already suffered through Jim Crow era discrimination and economic oppression, to join the tides of the "Great Migration" to northern and western cities. The “Great Migration” also accelerated the spread of music, like the blues and jazz, out of the South. Music was an important medium for interpreting the Flood and could be considered an act of resistance. Richard Mizelle, in his book *Backwater Blues: The Mississippi Flood of 1927 in the African American Imagination*, describes the blues as a “counterhegemonic force or corrective impulse” that spoke to a range of traumatic black experiences that were largely excluded from the mainstream media coverage of the Flood disaster. The Flood of 1927 inspired many songs, including Bessie Smith’s “Backwater Blues,” which became an “anthem” of sorts for the Flood and enjoyed a wide audience. Recorded in February of 1927, during the early stages of the Flood, it was one of the first songs to be written and circulated widely during a “still unfolding” disaster. In 1929, Memphis Minnie and Kansas Joe penned “When the Levees Break,” which spoke to the experience of many of the displaced, and many artists, Led Zeppelin among them, have since covered the song. In her brilliant and Grammy-deserving album, *Lemonade* (2016), Beyoncé samples the track in the song “Don’t Hurt Yourself.” Parenthetically, the music video for “Formation” (from

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69 Ibid.
the same album) begins with a narrator saying, “What happened at the New Orleans?” over an image of Beyoncé standing on a New Orleans police car partially submerged in floodwater (with submerged houses in the background). The penultimate scene in the video is Beyoncé sinking with the vehicle into the muddy water. While the song is referencing Hurricane Katrina and the circumstances that left many African Americans particularly vulnerable to the flooding in New Orleans and, many argue, overlooked in the relief efforts, there is certainly an important connection to be made about the continued role of music in translating environmental racism in the Deep South. In addition to song lyrics, the Flood of 1927 inspired a rich literary response, including poetry by Langston Hughes and works of fiction by Richard Wright and William Faulkner. The literary and lyrical traditions inspired by the Flood are richly detailed in Susan Parrish’s *Flood Year 1927: A Cultural History* and Richard Mizelle Jr.’s *Backwater Blues: The Mississippi Flood in the African American Imagination*. The next section examines works of non-fiction about the Flood.

**Writing the Flood: A Review of Scholarship**

The Flood of 1927 has been the subject of considerable scholarship. The following is a partial gloss of some of the major works that focus mainly on the Flood of 1927, all of which have been incredibly helpful in my research. Each of these books, of course, has its own narrative frame. John Barry’s *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi River Flood and How it Changed America* (1997) is a critically acclaimed and popular history. *Rising Tide*, which reached bestseller status and also

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71 Parrish, *The Flood Year 1927: A Cultural History*.
73 Barry, *Rising Tide*. 
inspired the PBS documentary film *Fatal Flood*, is credited with bringing the Flood back into national consciousness. In the book, Barry provides a long back-story before the Flood, profiling several figures including the engineers Humphreys and Eads, whose squabbling he deems responsible for the disastrous levees-only policy; Herbert Hoover, who leveraged the flood relief operation for political gain; and William A. Percy, who was part of the influential Percy family and Chairman of Relief in Greenville after the Flood. Barry notes that the Greenville, Mississippi relief camps were infamous for racial abuses. Percy became associated with a particularly notorious scandal when he decided, under pressure from his father and local planters concerned about keeping their labor contained, to turn away nearly empty steamers that came to transport over 10,000 black refugees, who were then stranded on the levee for several more days. In his book, Barry highlights the racial discrimination that pervaded the relief efforts and discusses briefly the migration inspired by the Flood. Barry credits the Flood with shaping river management decisions and local and national politics for decades. Pete Daniel’s earlier work *Deep’n as it Come* (1977) is a slimmer volume that focuses less on historical context than Barry, but provides a concise and comprehensive account of the Flood, with chapters about the Crevasse, Rescue, Refugees and Reconstruction. The book is rich in photographs and analysis of relief camp management and the Reconstruction period. Daniel also discusses the efforts of the Red Cross to downplay the problems that undermined the relief operations. In his introduction, Daniel emphasizes “the history of the flood is

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74 Ibid., 310.
75 Ibid., 313.
not the story of agencies and of dollars and cents, but of the experiences of each of those people in their personal struggles against the river’s force and destruction.”

Richard Mizelle Jr.’s *Backwater Blues: The Mississippi Flood of 1927 in the African American Imagination* (2014) uses the lens of blues music to discuss the racial dynamics of the relief efforts and migration inspired by the Flood. His chapter “Racialized Charity and the Militarization of Flood Relief in Postwar America” deeply examines the publicity rhetoric of the Red Cross and the closely guarded relief camps. *Mississippi River Tragedies: A Century of Unnatural Disaster* (2014) by Sander Zellmer and Christine Klein puts the Flood of 1927 into context with other major Mississippi floods of the twentieth century, discussing the engineering legacy and legal contexts of the floods. The recently published *Flood Year 1927: A Cultural History* (2017) by Susan Scott Parrish offered the most germane analysis for this thesis. Parrish, a literary scholar, examines the media interpretations and literary legacy of the Flood. She begins the book examining newspaper coverage of the Flood, but devotes a majority of her analysis to discussing vaudeville and the literary interpretations of the Flood by William Faulkner and Richard Wright.

**Disaster Studies Analytical Framework**

Much of the analysis in this thesis about the framing and representation of the victims of the Flood of 1927 is deeply informed by a rich trove of disaster studies literature. “Disaster studies,” often situated under the umbrella of science and technology studies, examines the social and technological interactions to understand

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78 Klein and Zellmer, *Mississippi River Tragedies: A Century of Unnatural Disaster*. 
the pre-conditions and consequences of disasters. In a salient article about Hurricane Katrina, geographer Neil Smith wrote:

> It is generally accepted among environmental geographers that there is no such thing as a natural disaster. In every phase and aspect of a disaster – causes, vulnerability, preparedness, results and response, and reconstruction – the contours of disaster and the difference between who lives and who dies is to a greater or lesser extent a social calculus.\(^\text{79}\)

Refusing to call something a “natural disaster” does not mean that one is oblivious to the environmental elements.\(^\text{80}\) Clearly, earthquakes and tornadoes and hurricanes are all naturally occurring phenomena, but whether they kill people (and who) depends on settlement patterns, infrastructure, environmental modifications, and evacuation and rescue methods, among many other factors. As Ted Steinberg argues in his landmark book *Acts of God: An Unnatural History of Natural Disaster*, framing the Flood as a “natural” event, or an act of God, erases the fact that the disparate impacts of the disaster were products of specific political, technical and economic decisions made *prior* to the flood and *during* the relief efforts.\(^\text{81}\) Steinberg traces the history of calamities and the government responses, and concludes (in an appended chapter on Hurricane Katrina) that calling something an “Act of God” “rationalize[s] the economic oppression that explains why some people can flee impending calamity and others cannot […], why some live and die.”\(^\text{82}\) While the Flood of 1927 was a product of heavy rains that swelled the Mississippi to abnormally high levels, most social scientists would be hard-pressed to label the Flood of 1927 a “natural disaster.”

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\(^\text{80}\) Ibid.


\(^\text{82}\) Ibid., 211.
Flood was dangerous because engineers had decided to construct tall levees on both sides of the river, thereby enabling the channel to fill without outlet. Additionally, environmentalists highlighted that deforestation in the region had accelerated flooding.83 The Flood disaster was unnatural, not only because of the engineering decisions and environmental alterations that made it possible, but also because the social and economic history of the Mississippi Delta region made it so that the harms were not experienced equally.

Many activists and scholars have documented the disproportionate burdens frequently born by low-income minorities in the wake of environmental disasters, noting how these individuals often live in areas more vulnerable to devastation or lack the resources to evacuate or prepare adequately. Such issues are nestled under the umbrella of “environmental justice,” which describes the movement that seeks to fairly distribute environmental risks and benefits and also the aligned fields of academic inquiry. For a history of the “environmental justice” movement, let us briefly move out of the Mississippi Delta and Gulf Coast regions to visit North Carolina. In 1982, state officials sought to build a PCB landfill in Warren County, a small county near the Virginia border with a nearly 90% African American population. Residents objected to the landfill for potentially posing a risk to the local water supply and also cried foul on the selection of a low-income minority community as the site.84 Civil rights leaders joined a grassroots movement.


84 Dr. Benjamin Chavis, *Environmental Justice: Opposing a Toxic Waste Landfill*. PBS. Film.
Demonstrators attempted to block the dump trucks with their bodies and such protests resulted in the arrest of hundreds and garnered national media attention.\textsuperscript{85} Photographs of the struggle circulated widely and became early symbols of what would become known as a catalyst for the modern “environmental justice movement.” The seminal United Church of Christ’s Commission for Racial Justice Report \textit{Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States: A National Report on the Racial and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites}, released in 1987, documented patterns of concentrated toxic waste sites and landfills in poor communities of color, describing this as “environmental racism.”\textsuperscript{86} Although the terms “environmental justice” and “environmental racism” emerged in the 1970s and 1980s and in the specific context of toxicity, such phrases have been applied to other situations in which communities of color disproportionately experience environmental hazards. Robert Bullard and Beverly Wright, scholars of environmental justice, discuss both the 1927 Flood and Hurricane Katrina in the context of systemic inequality and lack of investment in protective infrastructure that leaves African Americans disproportionately vulnerable to environmental disasters,\textsuperscript{87} in their book, \textit{The Wrong Complexion for Protection}, which “places the government response to Hurricane Katrina in historical context.”\textsuperscript{88} The book identifies the Mississippi Flood of 1927 as one of the problems in “eight decades of ‘Katrina


\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., xvi.
responses’ to public health emergencies, environmental hazards, industrial accidents, and natural and human-induced disasters [that] have left blacks less safe and less secure than whites in their homes, schools, neighborhoods, and workplaces.”

Riveria and Miller in their article “Continually Neglected: Situating Natural Disasters in the African American Experience” describe and connect several environmental disasters that unduly impacted African Americans, citing both the Flood of 1927 and Hurricane Katrina. Terms like “environmental justice” and “unnatural disaster” can be helpful in defining the unequal pre-conditions and consequences of disasters. Describing the impacts of disaster as random or accidental ignores the economic and racial geographies that may leave certain communities particularly vulnerable to devastation.

Though technical breakdowns and accidents are often framed as unpredictable failures (frequently to absolve systems and decision-makers of guilt), they are, as Charles Perrow argues in his landmark book, *Normal Accidents* (1984), inevitable. Perrow theorizes “most high-risk systems have special characteristics beyond their toxic or explosive or genetic dangers that make accidents in them inevitable, even ‘normal.’” Even though accidents may be inevitable, citizens and public officials often understand and treat such moments as aberrations, that must be diagnosed in such a way that there is a clear solution that will restore faith in the systems once again. In "Overflow and Containment in the Aftermath of Disaster," science and

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89 Ibid., 233.
91 Ibid., 504.
technology studies scholar Stephen Hilgartner summarizes some of the key principles of disaster studies, which include “there is no such thing as a natural disaster”\(^93\) and “disasters and accidents create profoundly disturbing collective experiences that challenge the managerial vision of orderly systems. Disasters evoke horror not only because they make chaos and suffering visible but also because they reveal shocking disorder in sociotechnical systems.”\(^94\) In the context of this thesis, perhaps the most salient point of Hilgartner’s framework is the eagerness of public officials to contain a disaster discursively:

> Officials and citizens alike typically perceive reestablishing order to be a central priority, but accomplishing this depends not merely on containing the disaster on the ground (regaining control, rescuing people, rebuilding systems), but also on containing it discursively. Public authorities must address the meaning of a disaster as well as the materiality of it. Reclaiming a sense of normalcy may depend on placing the episode securely within a narrative frame that restores confidence in the capacity of social institutions, especially the state, to protect the citizenry.\(^95\)

For example, in the wake of the 1927 Flood, the Red Cross and aligned government agencies and media outlets worked to contain the disaster discursively in such a way that mobilized the country. A key element in framing disaster is the assignment of blame and responsibility.\(^96\) Dianne Vaughan’s *The Challenger Launch Decision: Risky Technology, Culture, and Deviance at NASA* provides an excellent example of analyzing and revising the dominant narrative that deemed the deficient O-ring responsible for the *Challenger* explosion. Vaughan pushes past the simple diagnosis by probing deeper to understand the bureaucratic problems that allowed the

\(^93\) Hilgartner, "Overflow and Containment in the Aftermath of Disaster," 153.
\(^94\) Ibid., 155.
\(^95\) Ibid., 154.
technology to be used in the first place. In this way she disrupts the official narrative, and provides an example of reframing a disaster. One of the recent, important works on disasters is *The Shock Doctrine* (2007) by Naomi Klein. Using several case studies like Hurricane Katrina and the Iraq War, Klein examines the trend she calls “disaster capitalism” in which corporations profit when governments farm out the work of war or reconstruction after disaster to private contractors, rather than investing in the public sphere. While the Flood of 1927 did not fit this arrangement precisely, the Red Cross did frame the Flood’s aftermath as an opportunity to introduce “permanent benefits” (like agricultural and public health improvements) to the South.

**Defining Displacement: Representation of Flood and Flood Victims**

In addition to narrative containment, this thesis explores issues of representation in the wake of the Mississippi Flood of 1927. This thesis broadly examines how organizations and media outlets use language and, to a lesser extent, imagery to describe and depict natural disaster and the people affected. This thesis does not pretend to be a thorough linguistic analysis, but rather draws heavily upon descriptions and identifiers used in official reports and newspapers. This analysis is unique from other histories of the Flood of 1927 because it focuses on the language and representation of displacement, centering the stories of the people affected by the Flood.

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“Framing,” as it is used in this thesis, refers to the narrative used to contain the disaster. To examine “framing” involves looking at what details are included and excluded from the narrative and where the story starts and ends (the timeframe is an intentional decision). A deep analysis of “framing” strives to better understand how stories are packaged, curated, and disseminated. The narrative frame, in turn, informs the appropriate response. For example, by focusing on the problems of the levees and prescribing more technological fixes, the government eventually framed the Flood of 1927 as an extraordinary natural disaster (of heavy rains) exacerbated by the breakdown of the (usually very successful) levees, which could be remedied by new engineering. This diagnosis of the problem and the prescribed solution did not meaningfully confront the potential dangers of continuing to settle in the Mississippi’s traditional flood plain. But, more importantly, such a frame failed to address the racial and economic inequalities in the South, which made the Flood a double disaster for many African Americans, who were made to endure not only the floodwaters, but abuses and discrimination in the relief camps.

The first two chapters of this thesis examine representations of the Flood and its victims by different outlets, particularly the American Red Cross and the “black press.” The second half explores the longer-term legacy of the Flood through an analysis of post-Flood out-migration and descriptions of displacement in contemporary disasters. The first chapter “Packaging the Flood Disaster: The American Red Cross Creates an “Official” Narrative” explores how the Red Cross used a variety of media (print, film, radio) to disseminate information about the Flood and their relief intervention, and to solicit donations. The Red Cross packaged
the disaster for public consumption and took advantage of publicity. The chapter then moves to a deep analysis of the Red Cross’s *The Mississippi Valley Flood Disaster of 1927; Official Report on the Relief Operation*, which distilled and curated a certain narrative in which the Flood was simultaneously a “natural catastrophe,” an enemy that required national participation to combat, and an opportunity to improve the South. Ultimately, the main message in the Report was that the relief efforts were a resounding success. Largely excluded from the report and mainstream media coverage of the relief efforts were charges of abuses and forced labor of African Americans. The second chapter, “**The Flood Was Not the Only Disaster: The Black Press Disrupts the Mainstream Narrative**” explores how the “black press” reported on and represented the racial abuses in the Red Cross relief camps. The chapter explores the rhetorical devices, like the comparison of camps to prisons or plantations, used by publications like the *Chicago Defender* to communicate the mistreatment of black flood survivors. The abuses suffered by black flood survivors inspired many to leave. The third chapter, “**“Refugee” becomes “Migrant”?**” explores the post-flood migration, and the semantic and literal shift between “flood refugees” and “migrants.” This chapter begins with a brief history and historiography of the “Great Migration” before discussing the migration of flood survivors and the importance of extending the narrative frame of the Flood to include this consequence. The final chapter “**Describing Displacement in Contemporary Flood Disasters**” focuses on Katrina and sea level rise, and looks at verbal and physical connections between the Flood of 1927 and contemporary flooding and displacement.
Stephen Hilgartner’s observation in his article “Containment and Overflow in the Aftermath of Disaster” deserves repeating: “Reclaiming a sense of normalcy may depend on placing the episode securely within a narrative frame.”\(^{100}\) This thesis argues that observers and interpreters, whether Red Cross staff, journalists, public officials, or engineers, often sought to contain the story of the Flood securely into the narrative that served their agenda best. The thesis examines the ways in which the Flood and its survivors defied containment. The theme of containment is dynamic and relevant in several contexts. The American National Red Cross sought to contain the relief efforts neatly into a narrative of success, excluding any meaningful discussion of the problems and inequalities that undermined the operation. Black journalists disrupted the curated mainstream narrative to object to the forced containment of black flood refugees in the “relief camps.” The black flood survivors who migrated North made an active decision to not be contained to the South; their stories of migration push and expand the geographic and temporal frames of the Flood story. Finally, engineering attempts to contain the Mississippi River once and for all have only accelerated submersion of parts of lower Louisiana.

Despite all the attempts, the story and influence of the Mississippi Flood of 1927 cannot be contained neatly. Much like the muddy waters of the Mississippi pushing over and through the levees, the legacy of the Flood has spilled over, seeping into and saturating this nation’s history.

\(^{100}\) Hilgartner, "Overflow and Containment in the Aftermath of Disaster," 154.
CHAPTER ONE

Packaging the Flood Disaster:
The American Red Cross Creates an “Official” Narrative

Orchestrating the Relief Operations

By any measure, the Flood of 1927 and the corresponding relief efforts orchestrated by the American Red Cross were immense in scale. The floodwaters submerged some 14 million acres between April and May of 1927. The Red Cross managed a total of 154 relief camps, which served 325,554 refugees,\(^\text{101}\) who “lived in these camps for as long as four months.”\(^\text{102}\) Additionally, the Red Cross cared for 311,922 people “out of camp,” providing food and supplies.\(^\text{103}\) The racially segregated camps were distributed across Arkansas, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, and Tennessee. Many flood victims were forced to live in makeshift camps on the levees for extended periods, waiting for transport.\(^\text{104}\) While Arkansas dealt with the largest volume of “refugees,” the Mississippi Delta region was deeply affected.

This chapter begins by providing context about the role of Northern media and the Red Cross publicity apparatus in packaging the Flood disaster to generate donations. The chapter then turns to a deep analysis of the American Red Cross’s publication *The Mississippi Valley Flood Disaster of 1927; Official Report on the Relief Operations* (hereafter “Official Report”) to discuss their framing of the Flood disaster.

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\(^{102}\) Barry, *Rising Tide*, 286.


\(^{104}\) Barry, *Rising Tide*, 312.
Figures 2.1 and 2.2. Infographics from the Red Cross’s Official Report about their Relief Operations: “Number of Camps and Persons Cared For (Chart)” and “Chart Comparing Emergency and Rehabilitation Aid, by States” (From American National Red Cross. The Mississippi Valley Flood Disaster of 1927; Official Report on the Relief Operations, 39, 78.)

and representations of the “flood sufferer.” This document, published two years after the Flood, packaged the disaster and relief efforts to celebrate the work of the Red Cross. While a comprehensive analysis of coverage by mainstream media and the Red Cross Courier (the ARC’s publication) would be illuminating, such a project would be massive in scope. The Official Report was selected for a close reading because it represents a distilled “official” narrative. The Official Report discusses the destructive power of the Flood and the triumphant relief efforts without meaningfully addressing the issues of discrimination against African American flood sufferers in many relief camps. Ultimately, this chapter argues that the Red Cross represented the people displaced by the flood as victims of a mighty natural disaster and also
beneficiaries of the relief efforts and various Reconstruction improvement projects. In the Official Report, the Red Cross neatly contained the Flood and its Reconstruction period in a narrative frame for posterity. Chapter Two examines the ways in which many black journalists disrupted this "official" narrative of impartial and successful relief efforts, highlighting how African American refugees were frequently not beneficiaries, but "double sufferers" of the floodwaters and racial abuse in the camps.  

If the Mississippi Flood relief efforts were a play, the American Red Cross was the producer and Herbert Hoover was the director. The American people were a captive audience. In this metaphor, many journalists played an important role as largely

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sympathetic review-writers, encouraging more people to “watch” and donate. The nameless, numerous victims of the Flood could be considered uncredited extras. Let us take a moment to meet the cast.

Since its founding in 1881, the American Red Cross had filled a vital role in providing humanitarian support in wars and peacetime disasters. After witnessing the carnage after the Battle of Solferino (1859, Italy), Henri Dunant began in 1863 the process of establishing a humanitarian agency to provide humanitarian aid to the victims of disasters and war that would become known as the International Committee of the Red Cross. Clara Barton founded the American Red Cross after being inspired by the International Red Cross during her visit to Geneva in the late 1860s. Later, thanks to “an internal reorganization in 1905,” the American Red Cross “concretized its status as an auxiliary to military forces.” Domestically, before the Flood of 1927, the Red Cross had provided assistance to the victims of several environmental disasters, including the devastating Johnstown Flood (1889) and Galveston Hurricane (1900). In 1927, the Red Cross once again intervened because there was not yet a government agency tasked with managing emergency relief; President Carter would establish the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in 1979 via an executive order. It should be noted that in the intervening decades, Congress did authorize several pieces of legislation like the Flood Control

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106 Ibid., 22.
108 Mizelle, Backwater Blues: The Mississippi Flood of 1927 in the African American Imagination, 84.
109 Jones, The American Red Cross from Clara Barton to the New Deal, 47.
110 Ibid., 97.
Act of 1965, the Flood Disaster Protection Act of 1973, and the Disaster Relief Act of 1974, which granted funding for disaster mitigation projects, but this approach, according to FEMA, was “piecemeal.”\textsuperscript{112} In 1927, though, “because Congress refused to convene to appropriate emergency funds, all money for relief efforts had to be raised from that virtual national audience,”\textsuperscript{113} which meant that the Red Cross did a full court press for funding. Fundraising required framing the Flood disaster and relief efforts in such a way to inspire sympathy and a sense of urgency.

Herbert Hoover, as Chairman of the Mississippi Flood Committee, became an active leader of relief operations. Born in 1874, Hoover rose through the ranks; he began working as an engineer, and then served as an official with the Food Administration, and eventually Secretary of Commerce. He made a name for himself during the First World War, organizing international food relief in Belgium and support for American troops.\textsuperscript{114} The Mississippi Flood Committee joined forces with James L Fieser, acting Chairman of the American Red Cross, to work with the organization to set fundraising goals.\textsuperscript{115} As noted in the Introduction, the President at the time, Calvin Coolidge, was a small government conservative who was not keen to entangle the federal government in relief efforts. Compared to Coolidge, Hoover was a charismatic hero\textsuperscript{116} and a “genius” at organizing.\textsuperscript{117} Hoover’s efforts enjoyed much press coverage, and in turn he seemed to enjoy this coverage. Hoover’s “staff tracked

\begin{enumerate}
\item\textsuperscript{112} Ibid.
\item\textsuperscript{113} Parrish, \textit{The Flood Year 1927: A Cultural History}, 12.
\item\textsuperscript{114} "Hoover Gained Fame in War Relief Work," \textit{The New York Times} June 15, 1928.
\item\textsuperscript{115} American National Red Cross, \textit{The Mississippi Valley Flood Disaster of 1927; Official Report on the Relief Operations}, 13.
\item\textsuperscript{116} Barry, \textit{Rising Tide}, 287.
\item\textsuperscript{117} "Again Hoover Does an Emergency Job: His Genius as an Organizer of Relief Is Called into Action Once More to Succor the Flood Refugees," \textit{The New York Times}, May 15, 1927.
\end{enumerate}
the stories around the country carefully,” and he frequently paused to review the largely positive press coverage about himself.\footnote{Barry, \textit{Rising Tide}, 288.} So wary of bad press, Hoover lied about the total number of deaths from the Flood, claiming only three people had died after he became Chairman, even as those around him privately cautioned against such exaggeration.\footnote{Ibid., 286, 89.} But Hoover was so eager to frame the relief efforts as an unblemished success. He seized opportunities for photo-ops while touring the relief camps and remained visible throughout the crisis. A 42-minute film was assembled showing his good works and became one of the first campaign films.\footnote{Paul Martin Lester, \textit{On Floods and Photo Ops: How Herbert Hoover and George W. Bush Exploited Catastrophes} (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 176.} Humbly titled, \textit{Master of Emergencies}, the film focused on Hoover’s aid work during the First World War, but also included several minutes about the Flood of 1927. The film included such lines as “With his own miraculous speed, he mobilized the resources of the Army, the Navy, the Red Cross and the Coast Guard,” and celebrated Hoover’s attention to the child victims of the Flood, even noting “He did not forget the animals!”\footnote{\textit{Master of Emergencies,} (Hoover Presidential Library, 1928).} Hoover’s carefully curated publicity during the flood relief helped him handily secure the Republican nomination for President after Coolidge opted not to pursue a second term.\footnote{Barry, \textit{Rising Tide}, 289.} Hoover, master of publicity that he was, had carefully curated and encouraged positive media coverage of the relief efforts.
Mediating the Disaster: Red Cross & New Media present a “Pageant of suffering”

Both the duration of the disaster and the new media technologies\(^\text{123}\) ensured that the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 was able to dominate national attention. The Red Cross recognized and took advantage of a variety of media forms, including radio, film, and print journalism, to disseminate information about the Flood quickly to vast audiences and, more importantly, to solicit donations for relief efforts. Of the technologies available to circulate news of the Flood of 1927, Susan Parrish argues, “real-time, virtual disaster consumption began with this flood.”\(^\text{124}\) The American Red Cross invited members of the press to visit camps and had their own publicists working to document the relief operations. The first chapter of the Red Cross’s Official Report explains the power of media coverage in documenting the “pageant of suffering” for wider audiences:

> scores of correspondents for the press associations and the large metropolitan papers and of cameramen for the newsreel motion picture companies, were sent into the disaster area to picture conditions and relief work. These eyes of the public were responsible for keeping general interest and sympathy centered for a long period upon the flood and its sufferers, with the result that appeals for additional funds never failed. During the weeks that Mr. Hoover and Mr. Fieser were traveling from one end of the flood zone to the other by train and boat, they were accompanied by a large body of newspaper and magazine writers, many of them national known. Thus the vast, monotonous pageant of suffering and misery, relieved with inspiring tales of a lighter kind, was presented to the world. Through the agency of the press, the story of the flood and of the progress of the relief was carried week after week in the daily press and the motion picture theaters, while famous writers told of their own observations in the periodicals.\(^\text{125}\)


\(^{124}\) Parrish, The Flood Year 1927: A Cultural History, 12.

The Red Cross enthusiastically celebrated the collaboration with the national media and the duration of coverage. The length of the flood disaster (both the slow movement of the crest and the persistence of the standing floodwaters) ensured a steady stream of news coverage. The Official Report explained “[t]hrough the invaluable cooperation by the press, the radio and the motion pictures, the entire populace of the United States, from coast to coast, was kept informed daily of the progress of the disaster relief work as the crest of the flood crept its way slowly southward along the Mississippi.”

The Flood captivated the nation and enjoyed constant coverage in newspapers across the country for months. John Barry summarizes well the frequent coverage: “for nearly a month, every day it ran a flood story on page 1. It was page 1 in Seattle, page 1 in San Diego, page 1 in Boston, page 1 in Miami.”

The Red Cross even deputized papers, like the Pittsburgh Courier to “solicit funds for immediate relief of flood sufferers.” Such labels ran with articles lauding the work of the Red Cross while requesting donations:

Figure 2.4. The Red Cross commissioned a column in the Pittsburgh Courier to solicit donations. The Pittsburgh Courier, a historically black newspapers, would be among the vocal critics of the discriminatory relief operations. (From "Death and Famine Grip Delta Section as Surging Rivers Take Frightful Toll," The Pittsburgh Courier, May 7, 1927.)

126 Ibid., 16.
127 Barry, Rising Tide, 287.
128 Ibid., 287.
129 "Death and Famine Grip Delta Section as Surging Rivers Take Frightful Toll," The Pittsburgh Courier, May 7, 1927.
Lest someone think that newspapers were just seas of text, Susan Parrish emphasizes that “Print media in 1927 were replete with imagery—photographs especially but also maps and cartoons.” 130 And the Red Cross took advantage of visual media and photography in their publicity, which they included in the Official Report. Through this almost “instantaneous technology of wireless and radio, audiences could feel virtually present in the drama,” which fed a sense of national responsibility to respond. 131

The American Red Cross fundraising efforts for flood relief were enhanced greatly by a symbiosis with movie theaters. By 1927, motion picture theaters were a major cultural phenomenon, with at least 17,000 theaters sprinkled across the country.132 In the 1920s, “picture palaces,” urban theaters characterized by large capacities, elaborate architecture, and powerful organs, flourished as well. Silent films were often accompanied by live music. The first “talkie,” *The Jazz Singer*, was released just months after the Flood in October 1927. The popularity of movie theaters made them ripe for disseminating information and soliciting donations. The Red Cross made arrangements with the Motion Picture Theater Owners of America to solicit donations from moviegoers, wherein a “special announcement of the fund appeal was made from the stage of the theater and collections taken at every performance.”133 Additionally, the “Motion Picture Producers and Distributers” made available films for free to aid in the benefits.134 At the time, theaters in places like

131 Ibid., 68.
133 Ibid.
134 Ibid.
Memphis, Tennessee were prohibited from showing movies on Sunday, but some theater owners seized the flood fundraising as an opportunity to skirt the restriction.\textsuperscript{135} Taking full advantage of agreements with movie distributors and theaters to talk about the plight of the Flood and levering this for fundraising, the Red Cross allowed moviegoers to consume the disaster comfortably from plush theater seats. Newsreels and announcements made theaters part of a national audience to watch the suffering in the South.

Circulated by radio broadcast, movie theaters, and newspapers, the calls for donations stressed continued need, but also emphasized the good work of the Red Cross. The coverage ensured that audiences remained engaged and invested. The media coverage promoted by the Red Cross during the Flood and during the Reconstruction is well worth examining more in depth, but let us now turn to a close reading of the “Official Report,” and how this document retroactively framed the Flood, relief efforts, and flood victims.

Framing and Containing Disaster: The Red Cross’s Official Report

\textit{The Mississippi Valley Flood Disaster of 1927; Official Report on the Relief Operations}, a 152 page document (appendix and bibliography, included) published in 1929, contains the Flood and relief efforts neatly in a narrative frame. The Report begins by recounting how the first European encounter (de Soto) with the Mississippi River described a great flood, situating the disaster of 1927 in history of ostensibly “natural” disasters on the Mississippi River.\textsuperscript{136} The Report details the damages caused

\textsuperscript{135} Patrick O'Daniel, \textit{When the Levee Breaks: Memphis and the Mississippi Valley Flood of 1927} (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2013), 89.

by the Flood, the emergency response, reconstruction efforts, medical care provided to flood victims, and finally the disbursement of funds. The Official Report is richly illustrated; photographs play a major role in constructing and complementing the narrative of the Flood and the corresponding relief efforts. Along with the statistics, charts, and textual narrative, the report features thirty-eight photographs, assembled in ten pages devoted fully to photo-spreads. The photographs are arranged in almost a scrapbook-like fashion with different sizes and embellished frames—some photographs are tilted as though placed into a family photo album. The cartoons, embellishments, and whimsical arrangement of the photographs all betray the subject matter, which was, of course, one of the greatest disasters in United States history.

The Official Report serves a variety of functions like providing a statistical overview of the relief operations and an inventory of the damage, and thanking donors and volunteers, but, most importantly, it establishes an “official” narrative of the Flood and relief efforts. The Official Report exemplifies Stephen Hilgartner’s observation that public officials seek to place disasters “securely within a narrative frame.” While the Red Cross was necessarily not a “public official,” it “enjoyed the whole-hearted cooperation of the government of the United States” and served in some ways as an auxiliary force because, as noted above, the federal government did not have its own emergency management agency at the time. To be clear, narrative

137 Hilgartner, "Overflow and Containment in the Aftermath of Disaster," 154.
Figure 2.5. A photo spread from the Red Cross’s Official Report that advertises “Family life is preserved by the Red Cross relief camps.” (From American National Red Cross, *The Mississippi Valley Flood Disaster of 1927; Official Report on the Relief Operations*, 40.5)

and representation are distinct. A narrative is an account that contains deliberately selected details and is bounded by a chosen timeframe. For the Red Cross, the Flood was a singularly epic and spontaneous disaster that they handled and contained in relief camps. But such a framing leaves out the pre-conditions of the engineering systems that made the Flood possible and the violent oppression that was reenacted in the camps. What is included and excluded in the Red Cross’s narrative frame is worth
unpacking. The following analysis pays close attention to first, how the Official Report framed the Flood of 1927 and second, how the Report represented the victims of the Flood, in both text and image. As discussed above, the Red Cross enthusiastically took advantage of the visual media available at the time to package the Flood disaster for the public.

The Flood as “Natural”

In the Official Report, the first, fundamental classification of the Flood is as a “natural” phenomenon. The Red Cross emphasizes not only the naturalness, but the magnitude of the Flood: “In the destruction of property, the menace to public health, and the paralyzing of economic and social life, the Mississippi Valley flood stands out as the greatest disaster this country ever suffered. It ranks, in fact, well among the great natural catastrophes of the world's history.” In framing the Flood as “natural,” the Red Cross, Army Corps of Engineers, and federal government could be absolved of blame for the suffering of those affected and displaced by the floodwaters. On the fourth page of the Official Report, the authors identify the “prime cause” of the Flood as “abnormally heavy” rainfall. While the Report mentions deforestation as a promoting factor, no mention is made of the engineering decisions (specifically the levees-only policy) that left the river vulnerable to flooding. As noted in the Introduction, the levees-only policy has since been criticized by engineers and historians alike—but at the time, some public officials were reluctant to acknowledge the role of humans in causing or exacerbating the epic flood disaster. There were contemporary critics though, like former chief of the U.S. Forest Service Gifford

139 Ibid., 4.
140 Ibid., 4.
Pinchot, who “had spoken against the corps’ "levee-only" policy long before 1927.”

Pinchot famously described the Mississippi Flood of 1927 as "the most colossal blunder in engineering history," placing full blame on engineering mistakes: "This isn't a natural disaster. It's a manmade disaster."

As discussed in the Introduction, in recent year, many scholars in the social sciences have come to accept that there is “no such thing as a natural disaster,” as humans alter the environment and reside in such patterns that leave certain communities more vulnerable to damage.

While some officials were aware of the problems of the levees-only strategy, they sought to keep public confidence intact. Featured in a *New York Times* article, Hoover diplomatically explained that “[i]n ordinary times these levees have been so successful that the Spring floods of the whole Midwest spill peacefully into the Gulf,” and in so doing, he implied that the storms of 1927 were extraordinary circumstances, but also articulated a strong technological optimism that a properly engineered river could indeed flow peacefully. While mobilizing the country to fund relief efforts, the Red Cross did not want to waste time analyzing the how human decisions contributed to the flood disaster. While eventually, the government would acknowledge the need to invest in flood control, early on “publicists skirted the issue of the flood as evidence of a federal engineering blunder by representing relief efforts as a massive and flawless technocratic mechanism assembled by the country's best

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142 Ibid., 75.
143 Hilgartner, "Overflow and Containment in the Aftermath of Disaster," 153.
144 Ibid.
experts."\textsuperscript{146} The Red Cross frequently represented these experts as leading a legion of relief against a watery enemy.

**Regional Politics and Flood as “Enemy”**

Almost immediately, the Official Report describes the floodwater as an “army,” evoking the imagery of a militant enemy: “Slowly and irresistibly the great sea of muddy water advanced southward, like an advancing army, it continued its march toward the Gulf of Mexico.”\textsuperscript{147} With such language and patriotic appeals, the Red Cross actively crafted a narrative of the Flood as something greater than an environmental disaster, but a “fight for survival against nature” that required national unity.\textsuperscript{148} The Flood came less than a decade after the First World War, and this served as an important point of reference for the fundraising and public appeals by the Red Cross. In a chapter on the “Racialized Charity and Militarization of Flood Relief in Postwar America,” Richard Mizelle summarizes “[i]n the postwar environment, the Red Cross actively espoused military metaphors of war to portray fighting the 1927 flood as a patriotic act.”\textsuperscript{149} Such an assessment draws on the Red Cross rhetoric used in articles like the following from a May 16, 1927 issue of the *Red Cross Courier*:

> There marched forward a magnificent army of succor, represented in our Southland by that “first line” of trained, able and willing workers of the Red Cross, of the Army, of the Navy, of the Coast Guard, of the U.S. Public Health Service, coordinated into a single unit in a fight to bring men, women and children out of the slough of despond.\textsuperscript{150}

\textsuperscript{146} Parrish, *The Flood Year 1927: A Cultural History*, 68.
\textsuperscript{148} Mizelle, *Backwater Blues: The Mississippi Flood of 1927 in the African American Imagination*, 82.
\textsuperscript{149} Ibid., 83.
\textsuperscript{150} Ibid., 93.
The description of the volunteers and workers on the frontlines of the flood crisis invited the American people to rally behind the aid workers as they had done for the troops during the War a decade earlier. The deployment of such military metaphors proved highly effective in mobilizing the United States against the common enemies of floodwater and disease.

In both their regular publications and the Official Report, the Red Cross drew on this patriotic energy and military rhetoric to cast the flood relief efforts as a moral imperative and project of national unity. Representations of the Flood and associated relief efforts were deeply entangled with regional politics and identities. In the Red Cross’s construction, the North was being called upon to aid the South. An appeal for funds for the post-flood reconstruction projects in the Los Angeles Times quoted Hoover explaining that it “should be the task of a generous North”[to aid the South], elaborating “the North have the right and duty to bind their wounds.”151 Such rhetoric could also be patronizing, relying on the Northern white savior trope, as Susan Parrish explains in The Flood Year 1927:

Describing the region as “our South” exemplified Northern paternalism. The regional and militarized rhetoric in such appeals was effective in the more immediate task of fundraising for the flood relief efforts, but also in establishing a greater sense of

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national responsibility in disaster relief and river management. As noted in the
Introduction, this sentiment helped to convince Congress of the need for legislation
like the Flood Control Act of 1928, which distributed flood control responsibility
between state and federal governments.\textsuperscript{153} In an appeal to Congress to fund future
flood control projects, an October 1927 article in \textit{The Washington Post} drew on the
rhetoric of a Northern rescuer fighting a water enemy, proclaiming that the “Control
of the flood is, in fact, a war against an enemy that has invaded the heart of the
Republic. Maine and California are duty bound to stand by the States that are
invaded.”\textsuperscript{154}

As alluded to above, the connections between the Red Cross and military
forces in the relief efforts were not merely figurative in nature. Indeed, the
Mississippi Flood Committee included the Secretary of War and Secretary of the
Navy. The Official Report lauds the Navy for establishing radio communication and
using their planes to aerially document the damage and identify stranded victims.\textsuperscript{155}
The Red Cross also “procured from the U. S. Army” much of the relief camp
equipment (including “tents, cots, blankets, [and] kitchen [items]”), although it’s
unclear whether they had to pay for such supplies.\textsuperscript{156} On the role of the National
Guard the Red Cross Official Report commends the guardsmen for helping to
maintain order: the “National Guard organizations were especially helpful during the

\textsuperscript{153} Klein and Zellmer, \textit{Mississippi River Tragedies: A Century of Unnatural Disaster}, 78.
\textsuperscript{154} “The Program in Congress,” \textit{The Washington Post}, October 9, 1927.
\textsuperscript{155} American National Red Cross, \textit{The Mississippi Valley Flood Disaster of 1927; Official
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 27.
emergency period and in the policing of refugee camps.”  

Many black journalists objected to the National Guard’s presence, describing it not as a peacekeeping force, but rather representative of an intimidation regime and violent containment of black refugees in the camps.

Reconstruction and the Flood as Opportunity

The Red Cross represents the Flood not simply as a militarized enemy and force of destruction, but also an opportunity to improve the South. The Official Report is quick to announce that the catastrophic flood indeed had a silver lining:

Thus, while the Mississippi Valley flood of 1927 stands out as one of the world’s great disasters, and certainly the most destructive catastrophe this country ever suffered, it was not without its benefits. With its loss of life, suffering and tremendous property destruction, are involved many significant advances in the public health service and the promotion of social and economic welfare.  

The “Reconstruction” program, which concluded in May 1928, provided, in the view of the Red Cross, an opportunity to reconstitute parts of the Mississippi Valley.  

For the Red Cross, the “Reconstruction” was a chance to demonstrate their capacity to improve the agricultural efficiency and wellbeing of the affected region by delivering modern, superior crops and livestock; assisting with infrastructure; and supporting public health initiatives. The “Reconstruction” section of the Official Report includes, among others, the following subheadings: “The Rehabilitation Plan,” “Permanent Agricultural Improvement,” “Replacing Tools and Equipment,” “Restoration of Buildings,” “Stimulating Industries,” and “Permanent Benefits.” The Red Cross’s Official Report makes bold promises for improvement and development: “Although

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157 Ibid., 29.
158 Ibid., 9.
159 Ibid., 90.
the Mississippi Valley Flood of 1927 was the country's greatest peace-time disaster, the Red Cross reconstruction program following the catastrophe will result in permanent benefits to the section affected."\textsuperscript{160} The Report emphasizes, in particular, the agricultural intervention, celebrating the societal level impacts. The dissemination of “superior animals and better seeds” the Report forecasts “will tend to increase the knowledge of improved farming methods and promote the agricultural development of the entire Valley.”\textsuperscript{161} The Report also claims “by introducing better varieties of cotton and other seeds the Red Cross made a further contribution to the permanent welfare of the people.”\textsuperscript{162} Beyond the agricultural benefits for the region, the Official Report also discusses the Red Cross’s contributions to public health through vaccination programs in the camps.

In addition to the large-scale social and agricultural engineering made possible through the Flood Reconstruction, the Red Cross also touts the humanitarian support provided to individuals and families to help them rebuild after the floodwaters retreated. The Red Cross disseminated to many flood survivors, among other things, “1) seed, 2) temporary supply of food on leaving camp, 3) temporary supply of feed for livestock, 4) farm implements for planting purposes, 5) necessary additional livestock and poultry, 6) building and repairs to the point of shelter, 7) simple household furniture.”\textsuperscript{163} Particularly because "the government itself would do nothing to help flood victims recover,"\textsuperscript{164} the generosity of the Red Cross (using donations

\textsuperscript{160} American National Red Cross, \textit{The Mississippi Valley Flood Disaster of 1927; Official Report on the Relief Operations}, 92.
\textsuperscript{161} Ibid., 92.
\textsuperscript{162} Ibid., 69.
\textsuperscript{163} Ibid., 58.
\textsuperscript{164} Barry, \textit{Rising Tide}, 371.
from the American people) did provide a great service to many of the flood victims. Certainly the Reconstruction was a massive effort that indeed delivered food aid, clothing, farm implements, seeds, furniture, even books\textsuperscript{165} and other in kind support to many individuals and families in need.\textsuperscript{166} However, these rations were wholly inadequate for some. Upon leaving the camps, many refugees were “totally destitute,” having lost their homes, belongings, and the work equipment necessary to their livelihood.\textsuperscript{167} While short-term aid may have been marginally helpful for some, Barry argues “In fact, the total value of goods refugees took out of camp averaged only $27 in Arkansas (no figures are available for Louisiana and Mississippi). It would hardly rebuild the lives of even sharecroppers.”\textsuperscript{168} The Official Report is infused with the “bootstraps” rhetoric of self-sufficiency, emphasizing arrangements with local banks and credit unions to make available loans for agricultural development, but, of course, not everyone was eligible for such loans.\textsuperscript{169} Those who did not own land also did not receive the same consideration or support in housing reconstruction. For those already disadvantaged by cycles of debt, the minimal loans and rations disbursed in the Reconstruction period were deficient. Additionally, because the Red Cross also designated local committees to facilitate “rehabilitation activities” on the county level, this structure left the disbursement of relief vulnerable to local politics.\textsuperscript{170} As with the Reconstruction after the Civil War, in the so-called flood Reconstruction

\textsuperscript{165} American National Red Cross, \textit{The Mississippi Valley Flood Disaster of 1927; Official Report on the Relief Operations}, 87.
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid., 79.
\textsuperscript{167} Barry, \textit{Rising Tide}, 371.
\textsuperscript{168} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{169} American National Red Cross, \textit{The Mississippi Valley Flood Disaster of 1927; Official Report on the Relief Operations}, 89.
\textsuperscript{170} Ibid., 60.
phase, poor landless African Americans remained disadvantaged with the system stacked against them. The expectation that planters would equitably distribute goods to their laborers was naïve, at best. The closing of the camps provided only further examples of inequality, as John Barry points out, at Vicksburg “the black camp closed seven weeks earlier than the white camps” and black workers were sometimes “sent home to work even while fields were still covered by a foot of water.”\textsuperscript{171} Such details, are not surprisingly, excluded from the Red Cross’s Official Report. The Official Report claims that that distribution of funds and services was “fair and impartial”\textsuperscript{172} and carefully represents the flood victims as beneficiaries of relief efforts during both the crisis period and Reconstruction phase.

\textbf{Representing the Displaced}

Beyond the representation of the relief efforts and the narrative containment of the Flood in the Official Report, the specific representation and classification of the flood victims is noteworthy. The Official Report uses several labels to describe those displaced by the Flood throughout the document. Roughly in order of frequency of use, the Report refers to those displaced by the flood as “flood sufferers,” “disaster sufferers,” “refugees,” “flood victims,”\textsuperscript{173} “disaster victims,”\textsuperscript{174} and “stricken people.”\textsuperscript{175} Most of the descriptors used to classify the displaced people come with a qualifier, crediting the “flood” or “disaster” for their pitiable condition. By calling those affected by the flood, victims or refugees or sufferers rather than survivors or

\textsuperscript{171} Barry, \textit{Rising Tide}, 388.
\textsuperscript{172} American National Red Cross, \textit{The Mississippi Valley Flood Disaster of 1927; Official Report on the Relief Operations}, 22.
\textsuperscript{173} Ibid., 51.
\textsuperscript{174} Ibid., 96.
\textsuperscript{175} Ibid., 33.
displaced people, the Red Cross was appealing to the nation’s sympathy. The Official Report pivots when describing people who have been served by Red Cross camps, referring to them as “persons given emergency aid” and “persons cared for.”

Fast-forwarding eighty years, in a 2011 post about the Red Cross response to the Flood of 1927, the American Red Cross website describes the people served by the camps simply as “guests.”

The use of the word “refugee” to describe the victims of an environmental disaster requires some unpacking. The Red Cross Official Report and many newspapers used the term “refugee” to describe those displaced by the flood. Flood survivors even used the term to self-identify, as exemplified in Fred Chaney’s long narrative account of the Flood, “A Refugee’s Story.” The term “refugee” has, since the 1951 Refugee Convention, acquired a specific legal definition. To be sure, displaced and forcibly removed peoples existed long before there was an English word to describe them or a legal definition. Deriving from the French word, refuge, the term “refugee” was first applied to French Huguenots forced to move after the Edict of Nantes was revoked. In the wake of World War I, the League of Nations formed in 1919, and established the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees in

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176 Ibid., 53.
177 Ibid., 47.
179 Fred Chaney, “A Refugee’s Story.” M.d. 4 (Fred Chaney Papers) 2369. Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi.
During the inter-war period, the Office had a specific focus on Russian and Armenian refugees. Leadership changed over the next three decades, until the United Nations High Commission on Refugees was established in 1950. Before the definition was codified, the term “refugee” was used to describe the victims of several disasters in the United States including the Galveston Hurricane (1900), Race Riots in 1917, and, of course, the Mississippi Flood of 1927.

At the 1951 Refugee Convention, signatories drafted a legal standard for “refugee,” which has largely remained the standard. Section 1, Article 1 of the Convention defines a “refugee” as an individual who:

owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.

The original 1951 Refugee Convention was amended in the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. As of February 2017, the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) offers the following definition: “A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence…

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182 Ibid., 61.
185 Marshall, "Toward a New Definition of ‘Refugee’: Is the 1951 Convention out of Date?," 62.
186 UN General Assembly, "Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees."
187 Marshall, "Toward a New Definition of ‘Refugee’: Is the 1951 Convention out of Date?," 63.
[based on] well founded fear[...]” and contains nearly verbatim text from the 1951 definition. The legal definition has been criticized for being too narrow, excluding those displaced by forces, like sea level rise or famine, that do not meet the requirements of “persecution.” Although the application of the term “refugee” has come to be sometimes fraught, in the context of the Flood of 1927, the term “refugee” was relatively benign and communicated effectively a dramatic displacement.

The Red Cross sought to represent their relief operation as successful and presented the flood refugees as beneficiaries. Some associated with the relief efforts even claimed that the refugees were happier in the camps than they had been previously. In his memoirs, Herbert Hoover displayed an “attitude that displaced flood victims [were] somehow better off in [the] crowded conditions [of relief camps],” commenting that the refugees were “entertained by movies and concerts,” going so far as to assert that the time in relief camps was the “first real holiday” for some. One photo-spread from the Red Cross’s Official Report, with a caption that proclaims “Family life is preserved by the Red Cross relief camps” features a line of refugees waiting for food and two family portraits (See Figure 2.5). In addition, several photographs depict new crops and buildings as evidence of the positive long-term Reconstruction efforts. Another photo-spread featured in the Official Report provides a photographic narrative about the reconstruction of the town of Columbus, Kentucky, which is also given a textual treatment.

189 "Toward a New Definition of ‘Refugee’: Is the 1951 Convention out of Date?," 63.
190 Lester, On Floods and Photo Ops: How Herbert Hoover and George W. Bush Exploited Catastrophes, 175.
flood” shows Columbus in high water and then two “old houses are moved three miles overland to new location.” The bottom image is framed by two pairs of the Red Cross logo and captioned with the triumphant announcement: “Hoover Parkway in the new Columbus rebuilt on the new and safe Red Cross site.” 192 Generally speaking, the narrative arc of the Official Report represents the transition of flood survivors from victim to beneficiary of the humanitarian intervention.

On the whole, the issue of race is largely absent from the Official Report, both in images and text. Of the 325,554 refugees housed in the Red Cross camps, 225,003 were black. 193 Although a clear majority of those served by the relief camps were black, in the Official Red Cross Report, there are only two portraits featuring African Americans (along with one aerial shot of a barge carrying mostly black people). The first photograph shows a woman flanked by her nine children as she tends to a washboard and the second shows three rows of young black people, captioned “Colored children pose with fly traps.” 194 Unsurprisingly, there is no visual documentation of black men laboring or being monitored by armed National Guardsmen. In describing the racial composition of the flood victims and language considerations in the refugee camps (some in Louisiana spoke French), the Report asserts that “[i]t was, of course, necessary to consider the special needs of all of these racial groups in formulating the rehabilitation plans.” 195 Aside from language interpretation services, it’s unclear what the Report meant by “special needs.” In her book on the history of the Red Cross, Marian Moser Jones summarizes “race

192 Ibid., 68-69.
193 Ibid., 40.
194 Ibid., 40-41, 102-103.
invisibility pervaded the ARC’s public reporting on conditions at its racially segregated refugee camps.”  
 Critics accused the Red Cross of perpetuating discrimination by failing to engage with issues of race and by permitting local management to impose segregation in the camps.

**Discrimination Excluded from Red Cross’s Framing of Disaster**

Beneath the stories of triumphant rescues and heroic relief efforts were charges of distressing racial discrimination in the refugee camps. Stories circulated of black men being conscripted into labor and even being shot for ostensibly refusing to work. While Red Cross official documents announce a policy of impartial treatment, there were flagrant violations on the individual and institutional level. Discrimination and racial abuse, as manifested in segregation, inferior supplies, and armed patrols plagued the Red Cross camps. The Red Cross Official Report addresses racial issues in two paragraphs, in one incidence referring to them as “perplexities.” In response to the allegations of discrimination, Red Cross officials assembled the “Colored Advisory Commission,” a team of thirteen prominent African American leaders, in an effort to ameliorate concerns and “demonstrate the ARC’s racial sensitivity.”

The Official Report describes the creation of The Colored Advisory Commission to investigate those “perplexities” and celebrates interracial cooperation:

> In as much as a large number of the flood sufferers were negroes, the American Red Cross appointed a Colored Advisory Commission, the function of which was to visit the refugee camps and assist in solving some the perplexities in which this race was particularly involved. This committee was composed of seventeen men and women, with Dr. Robert Moton, President of the Tuskegee Institute, Alabama, as chairman. A separate

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197 Ibid., 199.
printed report of the work of this commission has been issued by the Red Cross because of the very significant progress it records in the development of interracial cooperation.\textsuperscript{198}

In the creation of the Colored Advisory Commission, there was a tacit recognition of the mistreatment of African Americans in the wake of the Flood, but the Red Cross Official Report actively avoids discussing differential conditions in the camps.

\textbf{Colored Advisory Commission and their Revised Reports}

The Colored Advisory Commission met in Memphis on June 2, 1927 and then dispersed to the relief camps to investigate. The first draft of their report, assembled on June 14, 1927 “confirmed charges that Negros were systematically being held in camps against their will and forced to work,” and even cited incidences of rape by National Guardsmen.\textsuperscript{199} But the early reports and most letters that spoke to these horrors were not published widely, and remain securely contained in archives.

Hoover was incensed by the early reports, which would no doubt have undermined his claims of “splendidly organized” relief operations,\textsuperscript{200} so upon reading “reports that supported complaints of peonage and discrimination, he urged Moton the best course was to act privately and not publicize the situation.”\textsuperscript{201} In exchange for keeping the “the most dismal parts of [their] investigation” quiet,\textsuperscript{202} Hoover promised to work for African American interests, if elected to the presidency.\textsuperscript{203} Moton ultimately acquiesced to the pressures from Hoover and the Red Cross, in the hope that by not

\textsuperscript{199} Barry, \textit{Rising Tide}, 382.
\textsuperscript{200} "Flood Hits More Towns; 200,000 Are Now Destitute; $1,234,000 Given for Relief " \textit{The New York Times}, April 26, 1927.
\textsuperscript{201} Daniel, \textit{Deep’n as It Come}, 139.
\textsuperscript{202} Ibid., 138.
\textsuperscript{203} Ibid., 139.
exposing the full extent of the problems in the relief camps, he could secure long-
term strides toward racial equality with a sympathetic Hoover in office. Later, Moton and others would be disappointed when Hoover failed to follow through on his promises. In the end, the more damning details were excised for the CAC’s accounts.

Pieces of the Colored Advisory Commission’s investigation and letters were later compiled and published in “The Final Report of the Colored Advisory Commission Appointed to Cooperate with The American National Red Cross and the President’s Committee on Relief Work in the Mississippi Valley Flood Disaster of 1927.” Compared to the Red Cross’s Official Report, the Final Report of the Colored Advisory Commission is a slim volume at just 29 pages. It begins with a May 21, 1929 letter from John Barton Payne, the National Red Cross Chairmen, thanking the Commission for their work and identifying the effort as “an important step in the development of inter-racial cooperation in the United States.” The foreword describes the scale and magnitude of the disaster and praises the efforts of the federal organizations that arranged relief operations. The Colored Advisory Commission’s Report (hereafter the “CAC Report”) lauds the apparently colorblind relief efforts and claims that accusations of discrimination were met with a swift response:

Differences in race, forgotten momentarily in the life and death struggle of the rescue stage, arose quickly to the surface when the camps were established and routine conditions prevailed. The American National Red Cross made no differentiation in its policies between individuals or racial groups. The organization, however, is largely built upon Chapter units operating on a countywide basis which, in the final analysis, have immediate control of local administration. Rumors arose of discrimination against Negroes in matters of

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204 Ibid.
treatment, living conditions, work details and relief given. Secretary Hoover and Mr. Fieser, with the same prompt and vigorous action that had characterized their attack upon the earlier rescue phases of the flood, announced the policy of a square deal for all, and appointed a commission of colored citizens. \(^{206}\)

The Red Cross constructed the assembly of the Commission in and of itself as proof of impartiality and compassion, although ultimately, the ARC did not adequately respond to the recommendations and indeed continued to deny allegations of mistreatment. Both the CAC and the “Official” Reports stress that the Red Cross was not racially biased. Describing the charges of racism as “rumors” worked to delegitimize the allegations. As the Official Report does, the CAC Report actively celebrates the Red Cross, for its “splendid achievement,” elaborating that “The records show that the results obtained in helping colored residents of the Mississippi Valley in securing adequate distribution of relief and needed measures of reconstruction have given the stricken sufferers a new hope and a new vision for the future.”\(^{207}\) After the largely optimistic foreword, the CAC Report provides a summary of the flood disaster, complete with statistics about the amount of land inundated and the people displaced. The CAC Report proclaims “The Red Cross policy knew neither creed nor color line. In some places, however, the difficulties involved in handling a mass situation of the size and scope of the flood relief operations brought complaints of mistreatment from colored refugees who made up so large a part of the human problem involved.”\(^{208}\) The CAC Report mentions two specific complaints (totaling half a page), but insists that “it is not possible in this report to cite individual

\(^{206}\) Ibid., 11.
\(^{207}\) Ibid., 12.
\(^{208}\) Ibid., 16.
cases, favorable or otherwise, with specific names and incidents, as this would tend to reduce the report to a mass of detail.”

Even before the sanitized report was eventually released, many African American journalists expressed a lack of confidence in the Colored Advisory Committee to adequately address the problems of the camps based on their affiliation with the Red Cross. In the November 1927 issue of *The Crisis Magazine*, a publication of the NAACP, W. E. B. Du Bois declared:

> we have grave suspicions that the [Moton] committee…will be sorely tempted to whitewash the whole situation, to pat Mr. Hoover loudly on the back, and to make no real effort to investigate the desperate and evil conditions of that section of our country…The one fatal thing for them to do, and the thing for which the American negro will never forgive them, is spineless surrender to the Administration and flattery for the guilty Red Cross.

Ida B Wells-Barnett was a vocal critic of the discrimination that stained many of the relief efforts. In a July 16, 1927 article in *The Chicago Defender*, “Brand Ministers in Flood Area as Betrayers: See Attempt to Hide Facts as Committee Starts Flood Probe,” Wells-Barnett offers her critical commentary on an advance copy of the Colored Advisory Committee’s Report provided by Claude Barnett (she notes “no relation, but of the same name”), a member of the committee. Like Du Bois, she expresses concern about the ability of the Committee to offer an accurate assessment of the abuses because they are so closely tied to the Red Cross. Wells-Barnett asserts that “[t]he public is dissatisfied with this “Colored committee’s” report, and it has a right to be. That is why it was doubted whether a “Colored committee” could afford

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209 Ibid., 20.
to tell the truth and still live down there” [in the South]. Additionally, a subheading in the article announces “Effort is Seen to Gloss Over Real Facts.” Her article communicates the anxiety of many Northern black journalists that the “Colored Committee’s” report would provide a superficial assessment of the problems facing black refugees without addressing the critical problems or holding local officials and the Red Cross accountable. Clearly, the Red Cross’s attempt to ameliorate concerns by creating a special committee was not universally well received. While the Official Report’s framing of the relief efforts may have avoided issues of racial discrimination, in the opinion of some black journalists, the Colored Advisory Commission Report also failed by avoiding discussion of the harsh realities of discrimination in the camps.

Conclusion

In brief, the American Red Cross’s Official Report is carefully curated to contain the Flood of 1927 into a single document and an “official” narrative. Through text and image, the Official Report advertises advances in public health, agricultural development, infrastructure, and inter-racial cooperation. The Red Cross characterized the Flood as an enemy, a singularly epic force of nature, and an opportunity, and represented the Flood victims as beneficiaries. While there is nothing inherently wrong with using such rhetoric to gather much-needed funds, the Red Cross failed to address the racial discrimination in their camps. They deferred to the Colored Advisory Committee to do so, but because of pressure from Hoover the Committee’s public reports avoided providing substantive details of discrimination.

212 Ibid.
213 Ibid.
instead offering a list of watered-down recommendations. Ultimately, both are sanitized, regulated documents that failed to confront meaningfully the racism that pervaded the relief efforts. Black publications, like the *Chicago Defender, Pittsburgh Courier*, and *The Crisis* magazine, disrupted the mainstream narrative by documenting and confronting the racial discrimination that marred relief efforts. Richard Mizelle argues that the black press “highlighted the Red Cross’s role in conceding, if only by its deafening silence, mistreatment of blacks in relief camps.”

As explored in the next chapter, many in the “black press” reframed the Flood as a double disaster of environmental catastrophe compounded by racial discrimination, and represented the flood victims as “slaves” and “prisoners” of the camps.

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CHAPTER TWO

The Flood Was Not the Only Disaster:
The Black Press Disrupts the Mainstream Narrative

Flood Refugees Are Held as Slaves in Mississippi Camp

Men Who Escaped Death in Government Controlled Area Describe Viciousness of Southern Whites Ruling Workers

by Ida B. Wells-Barnett

A July 30, 1927 article in The Chicago Defender announced “Flood Refugees Are Held as Slaves in Mississippi Camp.” One of the more sensational headlines about the aftermath of the Mississippi Flood of 1927, it introduced an article that detailed allegations of racial abuses in the relief camps. Ida B. Wells-Barnett, a prominent anti-lynching activist, early civil rights leader, and journalist, penned the editorial as a searing indictment of the forced labor of black flood victims, claiming that some of the Mississippi camps refused to pay their workers or denied black refugees rations until they worked. Such articles and accusations disrupted the mainstream narrative promoted by the Red Cross that the relief efforts were smooth and impartial.

As discussed in Chapter One, the Red Cross Report and aligned publications represented the flood refugees, both black and white, as hapless and helpless victims.

216 Ibid.
of a tremendous natural catastrophe, who soon became the smiling, well-fed, and entertained beneficiaries of the Red Cross relief efforts.217 In response to allegations of racial discrimination in the relief camps (aside from establishing the Colored Advisory Committee), Red Cross administrators, like Henry Baker, circulated press releases in an effort to placate critics.218 One such release to the “Associated Negro Press” proclaimed: “The American Red Cross makes no distinction as to race, creed, politics or anything else in its relief work…The way the Red Cross was treating the Negro in the disaster was much better than the treatment received by the Negro in normal conditions.” 219 While the rhetoric is shiny, there was overwhelming documentation of discrimination and racial abuses in the so-called “relief camps.” This chapter is not focused on reporting on or curating evidence of those abuses, but rather in analyzing the representational decisions and framing of the relief efforts by the black press.

As used in this chapter, the terms “black press” and “black newspapers,” describe publications written by a predominantly black staff for a largely black audience. Of course, the “black press” was not a monolithic entity and many of the statements in this thesis are generalizations. Not all black journalists criticized the relief efforts just as not all white reporters ignored the racial discrimination in the camps. Certainly, it should be noted that newspapers were not entirely black or white in authorship or readership. Susan Parrish explains that in the 1920s:

lines of communication crossed regional, class and racial boundaries. The “negro press” did not, for instance, make up the entire media landscape for

218 Barry, Rising Tide, 321.
219 Ibid.
African American readers. In the South, white-owned dailies carried substantial news related to the African American community, typically sectioned off with headings like “negro news events” or “color notes.”

Generally though, many black-owned newspapers did actively denounce the forced, un(der)paid labor of many black refugees and the violent atmosphere of many of the camps, covering stories that many white-owned newspapers neglected or refused to write. Such objections were not always circulated widely, as Susan Parrish clarifies, “black journalistic protest remained largely enclaved.” But not quite so insulated as to not have elicited a response, because indeed, the Mississippi Flood Commission was pressured to assemble the Colored Advisory Committee to investigate charges of discrimination and misconduct in the camps.

Among the prominent black newspapers that decried the abuses in the camps were the Chicago Defender, the Pittsburgh Courier, and The Crisis Magazine (a publication of the NAACP). Several smaller local publications and the white-owned, but progressive magazine The Nation also covered stories of discrimination in the relief operations. With a long history of activist reporting, the Chicago Defender was among the loudest voices of dissent against the narrative of “fair and impartial” operations from the Red Cross. Robert Sengstacke Abbott founded the Defender in 1905 and it grew to enjoy wide circulation in the North and South, reaching over 200,000 readers by the time the Flood of 1927 crashed through the Mississippi

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220 Parrish, The Flood Year 1927: A Cultural History, 70.
221 Liese, "Susan Scott Parrish on the Current Significance of the Great Mississippi Flood".
222 Jones, The American Red Cross from Clara Barton to the New Deal, 217.
Valley.225 The *Defender* notably covered topics like the brutal treatment of black servicemen during the First World War and lynchings in the South, and reported on and actively promoted the “Great Migration.” Like many newspapers at the time, the *Defender* relied on sensational headlines to sell copies.226

Many in the black press characterized the relief camps as a reflection and often-violent reenactment of historic racial hierarchies.227 The black press often represented black flood victims as “double sufferers” of a flood disaster and discriminatory relief efforts.228 The frequent use of terms like “slave” and “prisoner” by the black press can be understood to differentiate the experience of the black flood survivor from the generic [read: white] “flood sufferer” used in the Red Cross and allied publications, which, as mentioned, avoided discussion of discrimination in the camps. Before analyzing the framing of the relief efforts and representation of black refugees by the black press, this chapter will provide a brief inventory of the racial abuses in refugee camps. The allegations of discrimination included partiality in treatment, forced labor, and violence. This violence is broadly defined, encompassing physical violence, the specter of violence embodied by the armed guards that monitored the perimeter of the camps, and the slower, bloodless violence of hunger and disease, that may be unrecognizable as violence.

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228 Harrington, "Storm, Flood Leave Thousands Homeless."
Racial Abuses in the Flood’s Aftermath

Aside from the quotidian racial abuses that defined life for black people in the Jim Crow South, environmental disasters often amplified discrimination. Of the Mississippi Flood of 1927, historian Richard Mizelle summarizes, “like a snapshot of the past, the disaster provided a window into race and citizenship.”229 The Flood of 1927 was certainly not the first (nor the last) time that African Americans suffered disproportionately in a Mississippi River disaster. In the devastating flood of 1912, "although there appears to be no accurate count of the total number of human lives lost during the flood, at least several hundred died from drowning, disease, exposure and starvation. By some accounts, three-fourths of those who drowned were black."230 A profoundly horrifying example of racial abuse during the Flood of 1912 comes from Greenville, Mississippi where an engineer, seeking to prevent a crevasse, "ordered several hundred black convicts to lie down on top of the levee while water rushed over their bodies" for over an hour.231 The New York Times reported on the incident with the headline “Human Dike Used to Hold Back Flood: Negroes Lie on Top of Weakening Levee and Save Day.”232 Fifty years after the abolition of formal slavery, in parts of the South black people were still so thoroughly objectified that they were considered to be suitable alternatives “until additional sandbags arrived.”233

Another example of the conscription of black men to perform the brutal and unpaid work of flood management can be found the next year, during the 1913 Flood, when

230 Klein and Zellmer, Mississippi River Tragedies: A Century of Unnatural Disaster, 48.
231 Ibid., 46.
233 Ibid.
"laborers, many of whom were black men, held at gunpoint [...] work[ed] for days to shore up the levee protecting Columbus, Kentucky." The forced labor and abuses in the relief camps after the Flood of 1927 represent a piece of a longer pattern of racial abuses that were only amplified in the aftermath of environmental disasters in the American South.

While slavery legally ended with the Civil War, coercive labor regimes like sharecropping emerged to keep the racial and economic hierarchy intact in the American South. After Reconstruction, Southern states sought to preserve racial segregation with an expansive network of Jim Crow laws and “Black Codes” that restricted basic civil rights, like voting. The infamous 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling, which ordained “separate but equal” segregated facilities for blacks and whites, endured even during emergencies. In an era in which Southern schools, water fountains, buses, and everything else were segregated, it is unfortunately not surprising that even the relief camps set up to serve the victims of the Flood of 1927 were segregated. As with most segregated facilities in the Jim Crow South, the camps designated for black refugees were rarely furnished equally. Testimonies from black refugees highlight the inadequacies. In his account, Sam Huggins, one of the few black people featured in an oral history project for a documentary about the Flood of 1927 describes the unsanitary and crowded conditions of his camp at Vicksburg,

236 *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896)
237 According to the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, “This series of interviews was conducted for the Mississippi Authority for Educational Television, for use in the production of the documentary film, "The 1927 Flood."” They selected older
noting disease and insufficient tent facilities.\textsuperscript{238} Huggins reflects at length about the lack of nurses (“They just didn’t have enough,” he says), lack of food, and the long lines that left many (including pregnant women) to languish.\textsuperscript{239} While certainly his observations of the foul conditions and inadequate supplies are unsettling, there is a distinct cruelty that comes through in his description of how white people from the Red Cross [it’s unclear whether they were staff or volunteers] had “fun” sloppily distributing clothing items, leaving black refugees to wrestle among themselves. The following is an excerpt of the exchange with his cringe-worthy interviewer:

\textbf{Kline:} So, some of the people did get treated bad?

\textbf{Huggins:} Oh, yes. And they issued us – lot of the people done lose their clothes and the Red Cross come in there with a lot of clothes, you know, issuing them to us, and lot of the white people were going to have fun – I guess they figured it was fun – they would just get up on tall trucks and just throw them out and let the people rassle for them. Sometimes you may have the sleeve and I have the tail pulling – you know, like that. You think it’s a lie. I got one –

\textbf{Kline:} Oh, no, I know! This is what I want to know because this is the type thing that nobody’s told me before. That’s why I wanted to talk to you.

\textbf{Huggins:} You think this is a joke. They’d throw just boxes of shoes out. Sometimes you’d get a pair and sometimes you wouldn’t. I got a black low-quarter, good shoe, had a red heel on it. I never will forget it. I got that shoe like this week, and they scattered shoes the next week, if I’m lying, I just…I got the mate to that shoe the next week. I ain’t never been that lucky! I fooled around…got me a pair of shoes, sure did! And where they – you know, feces-oh, it was awful! So many people, women and men going in the same place, and childrens, so many people they couldn’t keep it sanitary.\textsuperscript{240}
Huggins’s description of life in camps stands in sharp contrast with white people featured in the same oral history project, who describe discomfort during the Flood, but nothing close to the humiliation and deprivation detailed by Huggins.

As the floodwaters rose, black men were conscripted to pile sandbags on the levees to fortify them against the impending swell, and after the Flood, black men were required to work on maintenance projects. A silent film produced by the Army Signal Corps about the Flood introduces a slide of black men laboring with the caption: “Reinforcing the levee at Baton Rouge LA. The way thousands of men worked night and day in rain or shine in frantic efforts to hold the weakening levees.”

Despite the attempts at fortification, many of the “levees melted like sugar.” Once the floodwaters arrived, the conscription nightmare did not end for many of the black victims, as aid was often contingent upon labor (men were required to work, and women were often required to demonstrate that a male family member was working in order to receive rations). William A. Percy, the “Chairman of Relief,” in Greenville, MS, issued labor declarations that were circulated by local Mississippi newspapers and cited in black journalistic protests. One such statement included the following mandates, among several others: 1) “No rations will be issued to Greenville Negro women and children unless there is a man in the family, which fact must be certified to by a white person” and 2) “No Negro men in Greenville nor their families will be rationed unless the men join the labor gang or are employed.”

242 Master of Emergencies, (Hoover Presidential Library, 1928).
Democrat Times, the local Greenville newspaper, ran “labor notices” that threatened those who failed to comply with arrest.244


The system of conscription and containment was achieved with the threat of violence, and, in some cases, use of violence. Isolated reports of shootings of black workers for supposed noncompliance stirred outrage in black newspapers.245 246 The presence of armed guards rendered visible the violence ingrained into the management of many black refugee camps. In her powerful essay, “Contested Terrain: The Mississippi Flood of 1927 and the Struggle to Control Black Labor,” Robyn Spencer summarizes: “The threat of social violence – lynching, Ku Klux Klan violence, etc.—that faced black people in the larger society if they stepped out of “place” was reproduced in the relief camps as a form of social control.”247 Conditions of the camps made it so that even if black people could escape floodwaters, they could not escape the South’s system of racial oppression. As noted, the abuses

246 Barry, Rising Tide, 320.
described above were minimized, if not excluded entirely, from the mainstream accounts, in white-owned newspapers and Red Cross reports. The black press, on the other hand, actively documented the abuses. In so doing, many black newspapers framed the Flood’s aftermath not as a humanitarian triumph, but a reflection of the racist hierarchies in the South and reenactment of the region’s history of slavery.

**Black Newspapers Disrupt the Mainstream Narrative of Colorblind Relief**

*The Chicago Defender*, along with other black Northern newspapers, served as a counterpoint to the “mainstream narrative” set forth by American Red Cross documents and mostly white-owned newspapers\(^\text{248}\) that relief efforts did not discriminate or that the discrimination was isolated, not “systemic.”\(^\text{249}\) Black newspapers countered the various claims and euphemistic language. For example, the claim in the Red Cross’s Official Report that “able-bodied male refugees did much of the work necessary to keep the site clean and orderly”\(^\text{250}\) erased the fact that it was mostly black refugees who did this work, and they were often unpaid or monitored by guns. Similarly, the simple proclamation that mess halls were “modern and sanitary” serving “clean and wholesome”\(^\text{251}\) food was countered by accounts in black newspapers that claimed the food was inadequate and of poor quality.\(^\text{252}\) The Official Report presented refugees as well-fed, for the most part comfortable, beneficiaries of a tremendous relief effort, and Herbert Hoover actively worked to assure the nation


\(^{249}\) Barry, *Rising Tide*, 388.


\(^{251}\) Ibid.

\(^{252}\) Wells-Barnett, "Brand Ministers in Flood Area as Betrayers: See Attempt to Hide Facts as Committee Starts Flood Probe."
there was no bias. A May 6, 1927 article in the *New York Times* proclaims a complete absence of bias in the relief operations: “but whether white or black there is no distinction in the matter of succor, and in this work the State of Mississippi is rendering, as is the Government, every aid within its power or authority.” 253 The article goes on to quote Mr. Hoover’s assessment that “relief work is being splendidly organized.” 254 By documenting the forced labor, the inferior food, and delayed rescues with which many black refugees dealt, black newspapers shattered the illusion of “no distinction.”

Black journalists and activists charged the Red Cross with perpetuating the racial hierarchy by remaining silent and deferring to local leaders to manage the camps. Recounting testimony from black refugees of abuses in the camps in a July 16 *Defender* article, Ida B. Wells-Barnett raised her sharp pen against the Red Cross, writing “If these charges are true, the National Red Cross is encouraging and condoning a system of discrimination, of peonage and of robbery of funds sent to a helpless people.” 255 In such a statement, she implicated the Red Cross for perpetuating the racial oppression that reigned in the South in their relief camps. Marian Moser Jones, in her book on the Red Cross, notes that the Red Cross’s efforts to deflect blame entirely onto the local plantation system ultimately did not absolve their institutional sins that “allow[ed] inhumane and oppressive conditions to persist in flood refugee camps.” 256 The Red Cross’s deference to local management of the

253 *“Flood Hits More Towns; 200,000 Are Now Destitute; $1,234,000 Given for Relief” The New York Times, April 26, 1927.*
254 Ibid.
255 Ida B Wells-Barnett, "Brand Ministers in Flood Area as Betrayers: See Attempt to Hide Facts as Committee Starts Flood Probe."
256 Jones, *The American Red Cross from Clara Barton to the New Deal*, 200.
camps, she argues, still leaves them culpable for the discrimination and abuse. Moser contends that the Red Cross’s “interpretation of neutrality[…] thus became a cloak of evasion rather than a cloak for advocacy; it enabled the ARC to shirk responsibility for the inhumane conditions at the flood camps, while allowing local whites to continue treating black workers as chattel.”

In the weeks and months after the Flood, black newspapers sought to hold the Red Cross accountable for their compliance and complicity with biting editorials. A May 7, 1927 editorial in *The Norfolk Journal and Guide*, a small black publication in Virginia, even warned readers against contributing to the Red Cross; Richard Mizelle explains that the article recommended that readers instead “donat[e] to the NAACP, fraternal organizations, fraternities and sororities, and churches, so they could be sure the money reached poor blacks in need.”

Richard Mizelle summarizes that "by constantly highlighting stories of mistreatment and brutality that most white newspapers ignored […] Wells and Du Bois [among others…] provided an important counternarrative to the one posited by Herbert Hoover and the Red Cross.” But this “counternarrative” has since become part of the mainstream historical narrative of the Flood. Historians, like Barry, Daniel, and Mizelle all discuss at length the racial abuses in their books. The *Wikipedia* and general encyclopedia entries about the Flood of 1927 devote considerable space to the discrimination as well. While black journalists writing in 1927 may have been

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257 Ibid., 200.
259 Ibid., 78.
disrupting the mainstream narrative at the time, their reporting has since been used to revise the inaccuracies and omissions of the Red Cross and other “official” narratives.

Rhetorical Strategies in the Black Press: Camp as Prison and Plantation

While many newspapers and activists decried the inferior treatment of black refugees, it was forced labor that brought the most vociferous objections. Among the most vocal critics of the abuses in camps was journalist J. Winston Harrington, “Special Correspondent of the Chicago Defender in Flood District,” who authored several articles about the “race hate” that marred relief efforts. In one of the first articles he wrote about the Flood on April 23rd, Harrington reports that the floodwaters have displaced thousands and offers an appraisal of the discrimination that had already begun to saturate the relief efforts: “Prejudice and race hate have added their burden to the fury of the storm, and our people have been double sufferers.” Elaborating about the violence used to enforce the conscription, Harrington wrote “with white citizens spending their time seeking safety, members of our Race have been ordered to work on the levees. Police, armed with sawed-off shotguns are invading their homes and focing [sic] them away without even a chance to save their household goods.” Coverage of discrimination escalates in his articles. By May 7th, Harrington wrote, “the ugly specter of Race hate has reared its head above the angry waters of the flood area” and began to document what he described as an imprisonment of flood survivors in the camps. A Chicago Defender article

260 J Winston Harrington, "Use Troops in Flood Area to Imprison Farm Hands," Chicago Defender, May 7, 1927.
261 Harrington, "Storm, Flood Leave Thousands Homeless."
262 Ibid.
263 Harrington, "Use Troops in Flood Area to Imprison Farm Hands."
from June 4, 1927 proclaimed: “Deny Food to Flood Sufferers in Mississippi: Relief Bodies Issue Work or Starve Rule,” explaining that flood refugees were required to work in order to secure food for themselves and their families.264

The comparison of conditions facing black refugees in camps to slavery, imprisonment, and peonage was a rhetorical strategy used by some black journalists to condemn the cruelties and draw parallels with past patterns of abuse. Many black newspapers used eye-grabbing headlines likening the relief camps to captivity, like “Men, Women Forced Into Virtual Slavery”265 and “Use Troops in Flood Area to Imprison Farm Hands: Refugees Herded like Cattle to Stop Escape from Peonage.”266

In her analysis of “mediascapes” in the wake of the Flood, Susan Parrish, explains that “one of the signature rhetorical moves [of black journalists] to bring to light Jim Crow conditions was to quote from, and signify upon, white sources.”267 Walter White, of the NAACP, wrote a particularly damning critique of the flood response for The Nation, “The Negro and the Flood” (July 22, 1927). After outlining a brief history of sharecropping and tenant-farming, he articulates that black Southerners “live in a state of virtual peonage, and the flood situation has been used to strengthen their chains.”268 Some newspapers reported on black flood victims who sought to subvert the system by avoiding the camps altogether, citing this as evidence of brutality. Walter White references anecdotes of black refugees “eluding guards placed around their Negro camps and escaping to shift for themselves, choosing to forego

264 Harrington, "Deny Food to Flood Sufferers."
266 Harrington, "Use Troops in Flood Area to Imprison Farm Hands."
food, shelter, clothing, and medical attention rather than go back to virtual slavery on the plantations from which the flood waters had driven them.” 269 The comparisons of the conditions in the camps to slavery were not simply a descriptive technique, but a warning about a potential amplification of exploitation that could become permanent after the Flood. Walter White concludes his essay: “The greatest and most significant injustice is in the denial to Negroes of the right of free movement and of the privilege of selling their services to the highest bidder. That, if persisted in, would recreate and crystallize a new slavery almost as miserable as the old.” 270

In addition to the written appeals, visual imagery in the black press also served an important function in the critique and disruption of the mainstream narrative. The February 1928 issue of The Crisis Magazine featured an image of a barge “en route to Vicksburg” 271 tightly packed with black flood refugees. 272 The same photo is actually included in the Red Cross’s Official Report with the caption “Refugees towed in barges to camps.” 273 By contrast, in The Crisis Magazine, the photo was captioned “Slave Ship, 1927.” 274 While the transport of refugees may seem a benign and necessary step in the recovery efforts, Du Bois’s caption disrupts and redefines the meaning.

270 Ibid., 689.
271 Daniel, Deep’n as It Come: The 1927 Mississippi River Flood, 68.
Du Bois’s caption draws explicit parallels between the flood refugees on the barge and the slave trade, which transported millions of African people from the continent to the United States, Caribbean, and South America. Crammed into the hulls of slave ships with little food or water for one to six months, the people transported during the slave trade suffered unimaginable deprivation and cruelty at the hands of slavers and callous crews. During the Middle Passage, an estimated two million Africans died in transit, of disease, starvation, or suicide. With his caption, Du Bois confronts the viewer with the argument that in 1927, six decades after abolition, black people in the American South were still being treated as slaves.

\footnote{American National Red Cross, *The Mississippi Valley Flood Disaster of 1927; Official Report on the Relief Operations*, 36.}
In addition to photography, cartoons were an important medium for commenting on the inequalities of flood relief.\textsuperscript{276} The article “Deny Food to Flood Victims” from the June 4, 1927 edition of the \textit{Defender}, was accompanied by the following political cartoon:

\begin{center}
\textbf{WILL THERE BE DISCRIMINATION IN THE MISSISSIPPI FLOOD?}
\end{center}

![Cartoon image](image)

\textbf{Figure 3.2.} Cartoon by Rogers. “Will There Be Discrimination in the Mississippi Flood?” \textit{Chicago Defender}, June 4, 1927.

In the cartoon, a few small structures peek above the water, each labeled with a sign labeling use for “whites” or “Negros.” The raft, home, and church steeple are designated “for whites,” while the spindly tree and, what appears to be, a log are tagged “for Negros.” The segregation of objects answers the ironic question attached to the cartoon “Will there be discrimination in the Mississippi Flood?” with a

\textsuperscript{276} Parrish, \textit{The Flood Year 1927: A Cultural History}, 71.
resounding yes. The adjacent article, discussed earlier, elaborates upon the conditions and oppression of the camps, arguing that “Race hatred” riddled relief efforts and includes a list of Percy’s labor demands.\textsuperscript{277} Alongside the text, the cartoon renders visible the disproportionate vulnerability and impact of the floodwaters on African Americans and the persistence of discrimination even in relief efforts.

Conclusion

Ultimately, it seems that black newspapers used terms like “prisoner” and “slave” to highlight, condemn, and protest the exploitation of black flood victims. Susan Parrish articulates that “As conditions in the evacuee camps spelled for their black populations both forced labor and violently guarded movement, it seemed to many that slavery had returned to Dixie and that Federal institutions like the Red Cross and the National Guard were abetting its reestablishment.”\textsuperscript{278} By drawing parallels between the relief camps and enslavement, many black journalists highlighted that the brutality and abuses in the camps could not be neatly contained to the contemporary moment, but rather had to be understood as an extension and a reenactment of history, specifically slavery. \textit{Containment} is important here not simply in the narrative or metaphorical sense, but also in the literal sense. Through a system of surveillance, that involved tagging black refugees\textsuperscript{279} and guarding the perimeter of the camps, Southern planters, local officials and the National Guard, attempted to contain African Americans to the camps.

\textsuperscript{277} Harrington, "Deny Food to Flood Sufferers."
\textsuperscript{278} Liese, "Susan Scott Parrish on the Current Significance of the Great Mississippi Flood".
\textsuperscript{279} Daniel, \textit{Deep'n as It Come: The 1927 Mississippi River Flood}, 108.
Beyond the efforts to contain black refugees within the relief camps, black newspapers also criticized the efforts of planters who conspired to keep African Americans within the South. A June 4 article in the Chicago Defender criticized white and black ministers attempting to discourage migration: “They have also been urged to advise our people that after the water has receded they were not to leave for the North.”

Similarly, a May 28, 1927 Pittsburgh Courier editorial condemns the efforts (like posting guards at train stations) of planters to prevent black people from moving freely:

In the various concentration camps where flood refugees, mostly black, are herded, the Red Cross and the National Guard are cooperating to prevent any of the black peons from escaping the vicious system under which they have labored. White planters are being assured that then the flood subsides their serfs will be shipped back to them for further exploitation. Armed guards, we are told, are stationed at all railroad stations to prevent the Negroes from leaving for freer territory. Despite the Civil War and the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments, the cotton barons it seems are determined to hold their black slaves in bondage.

The Red Cross cast the Flood as an opportunity to demonstrate their good works and to rebuild parts of the South, but many black Southerners, frustrated by generations of oppression, saw the Flood as a very different kind of opportunity: an opportunity to leave. Ultimately, as Robin Spencer notes, “The relief camp experience had hardened many refugees’ resolve not to return to the plantation.” The language of slavery and imprisonment used by black journalists clearly connected the relief camps with past patterns of abuse and reframed the Flood disaster. And it was the long, entrenched

280 Harrington, "Deny Food to Flood Sufferers."
system of racism and poverty that so many African Americans fled during what
became known as the “Great Migration,” which is the focus of the next chapter.
CHAPTER THREE

“Refugee” Becomes “Migrant”?

As the waters of the muddy, mighty Mississippi receded or evaporated in June, July, and August of 1927, they left mildewed furniture, stained walls, warped floorboards, and waterlogged fields. Many people who had been displaced returned home to assess the damage and set about the task of rebuilding. After traumatic experiences in the camps, an unknown, but sizable number of African Americans decided not to return to their homes, seizing the Flood’s aftermath as an occasion to migrate North and West. They may have seen the often-abusive relief camps as the “final reason” to abandon the Jim Crow South. This chapter seeks not only to put the movement of those displaced by the Flood of 1927 into a broader context of the “Great Migration,” but to explore the semantic shift from flood “refugee” to “migrant,” and the definitional complexities involved in migration.

Unlike the preceding sections, this chapter does not examine the language used by a specific official document or sector of newspapers to discuss the disaster, but rather looks more broadly at the changing linguistic status of people after the floodwaters cleared. This chapter seeks to emphasize the ways in which the story of the Flood cannot be contained to the Lower Mississippi Valley. The black migrants who left in the wake of the Flood push and stretch the neat narrative frame offered by the Red Cross and aligned media. As noted in Chapter One, the Red Cross “tried to

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283 Barry, “After the Deluge: As Hurricane Katrina Made Clear, the Lessons of the Mississippi Flood of 1927 Have yet to Be Learned.”
285 Barry, Rising Tide, 417.
keep the publicity lid on all the major problems of relief [like]…peonage, the high number of drownings, and venereal disease epidemics [in the camps]” and emphasized their contributions to the region. Thus it is not surprising that the Red Cross did not discuss post-Flood migration in their Official Report, which could have been seen as evidence of the problems in the relief efforts.

Before analyzing the specific movement of some black flood victims out of the South, let us examine more broadly the patterns of Southern out-migration in the early twentieth century. Defining the “South” for the sake of migration studies is a necessary, but thorny task. Historian Jack Kirby summarizes that “Most social scientists and historians employ the Bureau of the Census model—the old Confederacy [Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia] plus Oklahoma, Kentucky, West Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, and the District of Columbia,” noting that “hardly anyone seems satisfied with such a vast and diverse area.” The inclusion of Florida, Maryland, and Texas in this list is particularly fraught, and for the purposes of his analysis, Kirby excludes Florida. As used in this thesis, “the South” is broadly defined, referring to the states below the Mason-Dixon line. The specific focus of this chapter is the Southern states affected by the Mississippi Flood of 1927, with particular emphasis on the “Mississippi Delta.”

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288 Ibid.
The Migration Begins

The term “Great Migration” is now used to describe the 20th century relocation of over six million African American Southerners from rural, agricultural communities to Northern and Western states, principally concentrating in urban centers, like Los Angeles, Chicago, and Detroit.\(^{289}\) Historians generally bracket the “Great Migration” with a start during the First World War (roughly 1915) and an ending sometime in the 1970s (though this timeframe is by necessity, imposed).\(^{290}\) Some identify two waves: the “First Great Migration” (roughly 1916-1930) and “Second Great Migration” (roughly 1940-1970), with the interstitial pause representing the Great Depression.\(^{291}\) Like many migrants,\(^{292}\) black Southerners were motivated by a combination of push and pull factors. Generally, they were pushed by the oppressive racism and grinding poverty of coercive agricultural labor regimes of the South and lured by the promises of better opportunities and comparative freedom in Northern cities. Langston Hughes, the prominent African American poet, captured the “Great Migration” poignantly and succinctly in his poem “One-Way Ticket.” The poem describes the decision to flee cruelty and “Jim Crow laws” of the South. The narrator lists several popular destinations like Chicago, Detroit and Oakland, clarifying that he will go:

Any place that is North and East—
And not Dixie.\(^{293}\)

\(^{290}\) Ibid.
\(^{292}\) This term will be unpacked later in this chapter.
The millions of African Americans who, like the narrator in Hughes’s poem, were “fed up” with the South and eager and desperate for a better life, would change the fabric of the United States by weaving their stories, cultures, and skills into their new communities.294

While the “Great Migration” refers to a concentrated period of out-migration over the six decades between 1915 and 1970, this was certainly not the first time African Americans moved out of the South. Before the Civil War, many of the black Southerners moving North would not have been known as “migrants,” but rather, “escaped slaves.” In the Reconstruction period, a small number of African Americans did migrate north. In his 1964 article in the Demography journal “The Negro Leaves the South,” sociologist Horace Hamilton summarizes that migration did not begin in earnest until 1890, citing slowing agricultural sectors in the South and the proliferation of industrial opportunities and jobs in the North as motivating factors.295 Between 1890 and 1915, out-migration began to increase from 10,000 to around 30,000 annually.296 But it was during the First World War that Southern out-migration really accelerated: “the steady trickle of southern blacks into the North grew to a flood.”297 The decade following the War witnessed a dramatic increase in out-migration with nearly 100,000 black Southerners leaving annually for Northern and Western states.298 Several factors conspired to make the 1920s a watershed decade for migration. Some Southerners feeling beckoned by the burgeoning industry Northern

294 Ibid.
296 Ibid.
cities were further motivated to leave by the agricultural scourge of the boll weevil. By the 1920s, the devilish little boll weevil had established itself across much of cotton-country, undermining agricultural production.\(^{299}\)\(^{300}\) By the end of the 1920s, nearly 1.5 million African Americans had migrated out of the South. During the First World War and 1920s, whites left the South in large numbers, too, though they did not contribute to the same demographic changes.\(^{301}\) As the national economy stagnated in the 1930s, the migration out of the South also slowed considerably.\(^{302}\) “The Great Depression” gripped the nation and many parts of the world. The “Dust Bowl” of the 1930s also set in motion a massive migration of (mostly white) Plains farmers, many of whom headed west to California. The economic depression, the worst the young United States had yet seen, dampened job prospects in cities. Thanks to Roosevelt’s New Deal programs and the Second World War, industrial jobs blossomed once more. The 1940s saw a marked acceleration in the out-migration of Southern African Americans, and this “was the first decade [since before 1910] in which the Negro movement out of the South greatly exceeded the out-migration of whites.”\(^{303}\) African Americans continued to migrate out of the South in large numbers well into the 1960s.

With the benefit of retrospect and census data, historians and demographers have a clearer sense of migration patterns. But how did observers at the time come to recognize and define the migration? Isabel Wilkerson’s prize-winning and best-
selling *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration* (2011) is a comprehensive history of the “Great Migration,” which follows several migrants, contextualizing their stories in a broader history. Admitting the rather nebulous beginnings, Wilkerson describes the start of the movement of Southern black migrants en masse as a “silent pilgrimage.”\(^\text{304}\) Wilkerson explains the First World War created the right conditions for a movement, but the precise beginning remains murky: “The North needed workers, and the workers needed an escape. No one knows exactly when or how it commenced or who took the first actual step of what would become the Great Migration.”\(^\text{305}\)

While the exact start may be difficult to pinpoint, some from the Northern black press early on began to invite and stimulate the migration in the 1910s. The *Chicago Defender*, in particular, was active in encouraging African Americans to migrate north.\(^\text{306}\)\(^\text{307}\) In addition to condemning the racism of the South and advertising the benefits of the North, the *Defender* even included “job listings and train schedules to facilitate relocation.”\(^\text{308}\) As early as 1916, the *Defender* described the out-migration as an “exodus.” A photograph of laborers in Savannah, Georgia waiting to board “labor trains northward bound” published in the September 2, 1916 issue bears the title “The Exodus.”\(^\text{309}\) The caption declares: “the exodus of labor from the South has caused much alarm among the Southern whites who have failed to treat them


\(^{305}\) Ibid., 36.

\(^{306}\) Grossman, "Blowing the Trumpet: The "Chicago Defender" and Black Migration During World War I."


decent. The men, tired of being kicked and cursed, are leaving by the thousands.”

The term “exodus” has biblical roots, originally referencing the departure of enslaved Jews from Egypt. It has since come to also have a more generic application for “a mass departure of people.” The biblical invocations in the photograph’s title here are connected with the construction of the North as a “promised land.”

Figure 4.1. Visually documenting the “Great Migration” presents some challenges because it was distributed over such a long period of time. Crowds at train stations like this one offer concentrated groups, which become identifiable to the viewer as part of a migration. (Photograph by Johnston, "The Exodus," The Chicago Defender. September 2, 1916.)

310 Ibid.
Drawing rhetorical parallels between African enslavement and the Israelites in the Book of Exodus has a long history.\textsuperscript{313} In addition to identifying the early rumbles of the “Great Migration,” the Chicago Defender also announced the arrival of new migrants, with articles like “300 Arrive in Pittsburg [sic]”\textsuperscript{314} and “Sixty More Come North,”\textsuperscript{315} though the latter article describes the men as “imported” to work on the Pennsylvania railway.

The black press was not the only group to identify the migration trend early. Southern planters were concerned by the losses of their labor force and sought to prevent migration.\textsuperscript{316} Government officials recognized the migration, too. A 1919 U.S. Department of Labor Report \textit{Negro migration in 1916-17} demonstrates an awareness of the migration during the First World War.\textsuperscript{317} Included in the report is a 1917 essay, “The Negro Exodus from the South,” from W.T.B Williams, in which he explains: “For a number of years it has been apparent to even the casual observer that a stream of Negroes has been flowing into the North from the border southern States. Some have been going from the lower South also, but that section has not hitherto been greatly affected.”\textsuperscript{318} Williams laments the out-migration, writing that “No southern State is entirely free from the loss of necessary and desirable Negro labor

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{314} Chicago Defender News Service, "300 Arrive in Pittsburg," \textit{The Chicago Defender} November 11, 1916.
\item \textsuperscript{315} "Sixty More Come North," \textit{The Chicago Defender} November 11, 1916.
\item \textsuperscript{316} "Emigration Worries South: Arrests Made to Keep Labor from Going North," \textit{The Chicago Defender} March 24, 1917.
\end{itemize}
due to this movement.” His distinctly vague frame of “a number of years” speaks to the nebulous beginnings of the “Great Migration.” Williams specifically identifies the floods of 1916 and the boll weevil infestation as the catalyst for the migration:

When the floods of 1916 destroyed everything in large sections of Alabama and Mississippi, where for several years previously the cotton had been a failure owing to the ravages of the boll weevil, the banks, merchants, and planters were unable or unwilling to make further advances to the Negro laborers on the farms. Many of the employers turned the Negroes out with nothing to live on. Some urged them to go away to find work, and for the most of them it was a matter of go or starve. Fortunately the unusual demand for Negro labor in the North at that time gave many of the colored people a chance to secure remunerative employment. Thus the exodus had its beginnings.

Williams eventually also admits, albeit reluctantly, in his report that migrants were leaving “oppression,” in search of “a square deal” and “better wages,” noting that “the South gives the Negro abundant occasions for wanting to leave.” It is unclear how many other witnesses credit the Flood of 1916 as a major spur for the “Great Migration.” As discussed later in this chapter, a different Flood, that of 1927, also motivated more African Americans to leave the South and to join the tides of migration North. The floods can be considered pieces of a larger constellation of factors, ranging from racial violence, agricultural depression, and poverty in the South that may have influenced the decision to leave. Ultimately, it is difficult to disentangle the varied and reinforcing factors that motivated many African Americans to leave the South to pinpoint an individual’s “final reason” for departing. The examples above sought to demonstrate the challenges in defining the beginnings of

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319 Ibid., 93.
320 Ibid., 93.
321 Ibid., 96, 100, 101.
the “Great Migration.” Because there are by definition diffuse, migrations are challenging to contain neatly.

Defining the Migrants

Up until this point, the African Americans moving out of the South have been described as “migrants,” but, as with all terms, the word carries a specific definition and connotations. The first chapter provided a legal definition of the term “refugee,” which since the 1951 Refugee Convention has described a person fleeing racial, religious, political, or ethnic persecution, who has a “well founded fear” for their safety. 322 “Economic migrants” are distinct from refugees and asylum seekers in a few principal ways: they do not have a specific legal status and they are not fleeing war or persecution. An economic migrant is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “a person who travels from one country or area to another in order to improve their standard of living,” 323 and they are not afforded the same protections as refugees. The term “economic migrant” is in some ways troublingly broad. If someone is living in abject poverty and flees a drought-ravaged area, it stands to reason that the law should view them differently from an individual in the middle class who migrates for higher income potential. For people fleeing poverty or oppression (that does not fit the “persecution” caveat), the definition of “political refugee” may not adequately encompass their struggle. As Ghoshal and Crowley examine in their article “Refugees and Immigrants: A Human Rights Dilemma” the concept of “economic refugee” as potentially be a more inclusive option, although the term does not yet have an

accepted or legal definition.\textsuperscript{324} New refugee conventions and definitions could and, some argue, should be adapted to respond to the spectrum of experiences and factors that motivate or compel migration.

As noted in Chapter Two, in the post-Reconstruction South, planters developed labor arrangements that attempted to replicate as closely as possible the antebellum conditions. Tenant farming and sharecropping emerged as “slavery’s replacement” and kept many black Southerners “in debt and still bound to whatever plantation they worked.”\textsuperscript{325} Convict leasing also emerged in the later decades of the nineteenth century as a highly racialized form of control, which disproportionately targeted African Americans; forced labor in the prison often looked dangerously similar to that on the plantation.\textsuperscript{326} Beyond the coercive labor regimes in the Jim Crow South, there were legalized segregation and myriad laws restricting African American voting rights, which only perpetuated the cycles of disenfranchisement. The specter of violence, rendered visible in public lynchings, could arguably have created a “well founded fear” for one’s life. Such racial discrimination and oppression can be easily recognized as persecution, so could the black people leaving the South potentially fit the modern legal definition of “refugees”? Could the systemic violence and legal racism that defined the American South until the mid-twentieth century meet the standards later set forth by the United Nations?


\textsuperscript{325} Wilkerson, \textit{The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration}, 1st, 37.

Ultimately though, “refugee,” “asylum seeker,” “economic migrant,” and “economic refugee,” are all merely titles to describe individuals set in motion, seeking a better life, safety, and stability. And whether called “migration,” “escape,” “exodus,” or even “diaspora,” the movement of millions of African Americans out of the South during the twentieth century profoundly altered the demographics and history of the United States. Still, observers and historians should be thoughtful about their word choice. Terminology carries specific connotations beyond the dictionary definition. In some cases, one might be forced to admit that the existing language is simply inadequate or imprecise.

Writers have frequently used watery language to describe migration patterns and the movements of peoples across continents and oceans. Phrases like “flows,” “waves” or "trickle" of migrants are by now almost clichéd. In his widely cited thesis on human migration, “Laws of Migration,” geographer and historian Ernst Georg Ravenstein uses a particularly elegant simile in describing 19th century Canadian migration patterns: “[Migratory flows] are like mighty rivers, which flow along slowly at the outset and after depositing most of the human beings whom they hold in suspension, sweep along more impetuously […].”327 Many historians have used similar language to describe the “Great Migration.” In The Warmth of Other Suns, Isabel Wilkerson describes the migration of African Americans out of the South during the First World War thusly: “The trickle that became a stream had now become a river, uncontrolled and uncontrollable, and about to climb out of its

banks.” In "Well-Founded Fear: The Social Ecology of 21st Century Refugees," Jeremy Hein and Tarique Niazi seek to make sense of such comparisons, positing that "ecological metaphors[…] indicate an unconscious attempt to use the social-ecological paradigm to understand refugee crises." As noted above, in the wake of the Flood of 1927, many black Southerners joined the tides of the Great Migration. In this context, the use of such river and flood comparisons is particularly apt.

Flood “Refugees” Join the Tide of Migration North

As noted, the “Great Migration” had been flowing for over a decade when the Mississippi so dramatically overtopped its banks in 1927. In his article “The Negro and the Flood,” Walter White of the NAACP, situates the flood into the context of the ‘great migration’:

There enters into the flood situation, also, the great migration of Negros from the South during the past decade. Drawn into the North on the one hand by industrial opportunities, safeguarding of life from attacks by mobs, and educational advantages, and on the other hand, driven out of the South by oppressive conditions, some two million Negroes have left the South. Plantation owners in the flood area were highly apprehensive lest they lose their Negro labor when the flood caused abandonment of plantations.”

The planters’ apprehension was well founded because thousands of African Americans did indeed seize the flood as an opportunity to leave. After the floodwaters cleared, many “refugees” made the literal and semantic shift to “migrant.” Richard Mizelle notes “Having grown tired of being mistreated in the years before the flood

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328 Wilkerson, The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration, 1st. 161
330 It’s unclear when or who the first person was to use the term “Great Migration” in the context of African American Southern out-migration.
and, finally, in the Red Cross relief camps during the crisis period, it seems clear that many blacks and Creoles of color internalized the flood as an opportunity or reason to make a change, ” but some of the specifics are less clear. 332 Scholars have since grappled with such questions about the post-flood migrants: How many left because of the Flood? Where did they go? When exactly did they decide to leave? While such questions may never receive clear resolution, the question of why many African Americans left seems to have several answers. Many black journalists writing at the time and contemporary historians identified the abuses of the relief camps as a motivating factor in the decision to migrate. 333 In his final chapter of Rising Tide, John Barry finally engages with the long-term aftermath of the Flood for the flood victims, offering a summary of the “Great Migration” in the Delta and situating the Flood in that context:

By early 1928 the exodus of blacks from Washington Country, and likely the rest of the Delta, did reach 50 percent. […] Now from the floodplain of the Mississippi River, from Arkansas, from Louisiana, from Mississippi, blacks were heading north in even larger numbers […] Certainly not all of this exodus came from the floodplain of the Mississippi River. And even within that alluvial empire, the great flood of 1927 was hardly the only reason for blacks to abandon their homes. But for tens of thousands of blacks in the Delta of the Mississippi River, the flood was the final reason. 334

Barry identifies the Flood and the relief camps as “the final reason” in spurring the migration of many, but acknowledges that it’s difficult to pinpoint an origin or deciding factor for all the migrants, particularly during a time of disruption like a flood. White residents in the Mississippi Delta region also recognized, at least in

332 Mizelle, Backwater Blues: The Mississippi Flood of 1927 in the African American Imagination, 103.
333 Ibid.
334 Barry, Rising Tide. 417
retrospect, that it was the abusive conditions in the camps that motivated many African Americans to leave. In a 1970 interview, Greenville, Mississippi resident, Willie Gardner, reflected on the aftermath of the flood:

**Gardner:** Well, during the flood the water was rising so bad, and that, as I recall, caused a lot of people to migrate to the north. All through the town they didn’t do right, they didn’t know how to treat people. They’d grab them up and carry them on the levee and turn their pistols and guns on them; and when it got so they could leave, they went north.

**Kline [Interviewer]:** You mean that’s what cause, after the flood was over, so many people to leave?

**Gardner:** That’s right, they left.

**Kline:** Do you know, then, of a thing that happened to people because they were black that happened more to them; or, were they mean to everybody?

**Gardner:** No, it wasn’t everybody. You take the black people, they were required to go on to the levee and carry the sacks to do the…work. And the white fellow, he was there with a gun, or issuing food or something, or whatever they had; and he didn’t work any. That brought about trouble.335

Gardner identifies the conscription after the Flood as the issues that “brought about trouble” and inspired so many black people to leave. Planters, unsurprisingly, were not keen to admit that their efforts to maintain the coercive labor regime were a (if not *the*) motivating factor in the out-migration of the people they had so long exploited.

Planters and officials feared that once the floodwaters receded, the black people who comprised much of their agricultural labor force would seize the opportunity to join the tides of north and westbound migrants. In a July 1927 letter, Alex Scott, a planter fretted over the migration, reflected and forecasted: “A great deal of labor from the flooded section after being returned to the plantations is going north. It is thus a

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335 “An Interview with Willie Gardner, December 3, 1970/interviewed by Henry Kline,” OH 78-03.9 p. 98. The flood of 1927 / interviews conducted by Henry Kline, December 1970, Mississippi Authority for Educational Television, Oral History Audio and Transcripts, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi.
serious menace and it is going to offer a tremendous problem to all of us.”

Some black journalists seized the opportunity of the Flood to urge people to leave. In an exposé about the Flood in the July 1927 issue of *The Crisis*, W.E.B. Du Bois did not mince his words: “We hope that every Negro that can escape from the slave camps guarded by the National Guard and the National Red Cross for the benefit of the big planters of Mississippi and Louisiana and thelynchers of Arkansas will leave this land of deviltry at the first opportunity. Let them ride, run, and crawl out of this hell.”

Perhaps motivated by the message of Dr. Du Bois, many African Americans did decide to migrate in the wake of the Flood after traumatic experiences in the relief camps. But just how many left because of the Flood? Given the absence of census data specifically for months after the Flood or comprehensive travel records, the task of reconstructing precise estimates is difficult. An exchange between the President of Illinois Central Railroad Company, L.A. Downs, and Leroy Percy in the summer of 1927 demonstrates the efforts to estimate the “loss of labor” in the wake of the Flood. Downs describes the departure as both “great and continuing,” elaborating “I would hesitate to give an accurate estimate of the loss of labor in Washington County but I am quite sure that thirty percent is too small. If eventually we get by with a loss of fifty per cent I shall consider it fortunate.” Such observations serve as important data for ascertaining how many flood refugees became “migrants.” In their 2014 article, “When the Levee Breaks: Black Migration and Economic Development in the

337 Rebecca O. Johnson, "Lonesome Refugees,": 834.
American South," Richard Hornbeck and Suresh Naidu conducted an economic analysis about the out-migration in counties in the Mississippi Delta in the wake of the Flood, looking at agricultural production and technological innovation as indicators of out-migration. The study concluded that “Blacks in flooded counties are more likely to leave their county, their state, and the South entirely, while whites are not more likely to leave flooded counties,” noting that “[o]verall, the estimates are consistent with historical accounts of an immediate and persistent decline in black population in flooded counties.” 339 By combining anecdotal evidence and more statistical models, the picture of black out-migration in the wake of the Flood of 1927 becomes a little clearer. While a final number may be difficult to pinpoint, it can be said with confidence that several thousand black flood refugees refused to return to the plantations and instead became “migrants,” joining what would become millions in the “Great Migration.”

As noted, individual stories of migrants are difficult to collect. Some newspapers did provide accounts of the migration. An article in *The Pittsburgh Courier* described “The Escape” in which one “Mr. X decided to leave the levee works at Lake Providence, La., and go North or West. Heading North through Louisiana and Arkansas, they walked, waded, and swam more than 100 miles into Memphis, Tenn.” 340 Mr. X continued his “flight” while being shot at; his final destination is not provided in the article. The lack of individual accounts makes it even more difficult to pinpoint exactly where the migrants who left in the wake of the

340 Smith, "Eye - Witness Tells Amazing Story of Barbarism in Flood District."
Flood landed. Popular destinations for those leaving the Delta region included Chicago and Detroit. In *Backwater Blues*, Richard Mizelle profiles a post-Flood “micromigration” to Frenchtown in Houston, Texas. As the African Americans displaced by the Flood of 1927 moved to Chicago, Detroit, Frenchtown, and other cities across the country, many moved figuratively through the categories of “flood victim” to “prisoner” of the relief camps to “migrant” to newly arrived community member.

**Conclusion**

Highlighting the migrants prompted to leave by the Mississippi Flood of 1927 reveals that the impacts of the Flood were not contained to the time between the levees breaking and the floodwaters clearing, or even the yearlong Reconstruction project. As noted, in their Official Report, the Red Cross excludes from its framing of the Flood any discussion of out-migration. The process of migration resists containment by geography and sometimes, even a strict definition. The African Americans who joined the Migration, heading north and west refused to be contained to the South. Discussing the motivations and process of migration in the wake of the Flood is still a foreshortened frame. Part of what makes Isabel Wilkerson’s book so brilliant is that it follows migrants and discusses what life was like in the new places and the continued challenges and inequalities in the North. A narrow understanding of migration only discusses the *movement* from one place to another. A more thorough analysis of migration would also examine how the migrants change and are changed by their new communities and environments. Future histories of the impacts

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of the Flood of 1927 can and should more meaningfully address the post-migration experience, (information and sources permitting, of course). The final chapter seeks to expand the narrative frame of the Flood of 1927 even further by exploring the physical and linguistic connections between the Flood and contemporary flooding disasters along the Gulf Coast.
CHAPTER FOUR

Defining Displacement in Contemporary Flood Disasters

As noted in the Introduction, the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 was a watershed moment in the early twentieth century. The Flood set a precedent for the role of government in disaster relief and flood control. Some of the relief camps established to serve and shelter flood victims rendered visible the depths of racism in the Deep South. The Flood and its aftermath contributed, some argue, yet another reason for many African American Southerners to join the tides of the “Great Migration” north and west, changing the demographic, social, and political landscape of the United States as they went. But perhaps the most tangible legacy of the 1927 Flood was the Flood Control Act of 1928. With funding and a mandate from the Flood Control Act, the Army Corps of Engineers straightjacketed the Big Muddy with an elaborate system of spillways and higher levees. Such engineering has meant that the River can no longer deliver its sediment to replenish parts of the Mississippi River Delta as it had for thousands of years. Flood control projects have changed the ecology of the Mississippi River Delta by restricting sediment flow, and contributed, in part, to contemporary environmental disasters, notably Hurricane Katrina and subsidence along the Louisiana Coast. In his article "Political Culture and Disaster Response: The Great Floods of 1927 and 2005," Andrew Rojecki explains that “New Orleans would bear the greatest weight of the waters contained and channeled by the flood control project [authorized by the Flood Control Act of

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342 Barry, "After the Deluge: As Hurricane Katrina Made Clear, the Lessons of the Mississippi Flood of 1927 Have yet to Be Learned."
1928],” which accelerated erosion and undermined the wetland barriers, and it was this “unforeseen negative consequence of flood control that would prove to be one of the principal causes of the Katrina disaster.” While Katrina and the submersion of lower Louisiana are distinct disasters, those displaced could potentially be considered residual victims of the Flood of 1927 (based on the environmental and engineering legacy). Aside from being physically connected by an altered river system, the Flood of 1927 and contemporary Gulf Coast flooding disasters also involve similar representational and framing challenges.

This chapter is primarily concerned with how observers and journalists have attempted to define those displaced by Hurricane Katrina and submersion along the Louisiana coast. The structure, analysis and historical timeframe of this final chapter depart from the previous chapters, but this is done self-consciously and intentionally. This section seeks to expand the historical narrative frame of the Flood of 1927 by demonstrating that the story of the Flood cannot be contained to the times when floodwaters stood, to the Reconstruction period, or even to the period of out-migration. For both of the case studies, Hurricane Katrina and the submersion of Isle de Jean Charles, this chapter explores the challenges and debates involving what to call the people displaced by these disasters. What terms are accurate to describe those uprooted by a hurricane? How should we describe the people permanently displaced by sea level rise? Beyond legal or dictionary definitions, what do different terms evoke? While the examples discussed in this chapter deserve far more analysis (and have, in fact, been the subject of numerous books and articles), they are included

largely to highlight that representational challenges for the victims of environmental disasters persist. How to define disaster and displacement is constantly being negotiated. Susan Parrish poses one of the questions this chapter seeks to explore:

“What can we learn from 1927 about how to make transformative expression, and knowledge, out of disaster today and in the future?”

Connecting the Flood of 1927 and Hurricane Katrina

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, book sales for John Barry’s *Rising Tide*, originally published in 1997, rose significantly enough to garner news coverage. In the weeks after Katrina, Barry was invited on NPR to discuss his work in the context of the disaster. Penned in the days after the Hurricane, Barry’s article “After the Deluge: As Hurricane Katrina Made Clear, the Lessons of the Mississippi Flood of 1927 Have yet to Be Learned” discussed the connections between Hurricane Katrina and the Flood. After brewing in the Gulf, on August 29, 2005 the massive Hurricane Katrina made landfall on Grand Isle and then struck New Orleans with 127 mile an hour winds. As the levees, woefully unprepared for the massive storm surge, broke in the hours and days after the hurricane, nearly 80% of the punchbowl-shaped New Orleans filled with water. Low-lying communities like the Lower Ninth Ward were particularly devastated. The storm and subsequent flooding in Louisiana and

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345 Liese, "Susan Scott Parrish on the Current Significance of the Great Mississippi Flood."
348 Barry, "After the Deluge: As Hurricane Katrina Made Clear, the Lessons of the Mississippi Flood of 1927 Have yet to Be Learned."
Mississippi was responsible for 1,836 deaths; a majority of victims were black and elderly, who died by drowning or exposure after delayed rescue. Ultimately, Hurricane Katrina caused nearly $108 billion in damages along the Gulf Coast. It did not take long for witnesses to brand Hurricane Katrina one of the worst disasters in United States history. In moments of crisis, people often turn to history and relevant literature in an attempt to better understand the present. Several recent articles and books have focused largely on comparing and contrasting Hurricane Katrina and the Flood of 1927, citing some of the following similarities, among others: both disasters involved major flooding due to epic inundation and technological failure, disproportionately impacted low-income African Americans, and were widely documented by the media.

To compare Hurricane Katrina and the Mississippi Flood of 1927 is not simply to provide an example of “lessons yet to be learned” or “history repeating itself” because they are unique disasters, with distinct causes and consequences. But thinking through the lens of the Flood of 1927 can be helpful in illuminating the persistence of some problems in disaster response, technological vulnerabilities, and racial and economic inequalities.

351 Ibid.
352 Rojecki, "Political Culture and Disaster Response: The Great Floods of 1927 and 2005."
354 Barry, "After the Deluge: As Hurricane Katrina Made Clear, the Lessons of the Mississippi Flood of 1927 Have yet to Be Learned."
355 Ibid.
Framing Challenges of Hurricane Katrina

Hurricane Katrina was covered by a variety of media outlets, and later a truly remarkable number of articles, dissertations, and books, which used diverse and intersecting frames to describe and try to make sense of the disaster. Stephen Hilgartner, who penned his summary of disaster studies “Overflow and Containment in the Aftermath of Disaster” in response to Katrina, notes in his concluding paragraph that “The wave of scrutiny and blame that Katrina unleashed will prove impossible to contain quickly or neatly.” This brief section self-consciously does not provide a comprehensive account of the different narratives about Katrina, but rather exists simply to highlight the variety of ways the disaster was framed. Some commentators framed Katrina as a technical breakdown, or inevitable and predictable product of neglected levees, pressing further to question why those levees had not been repaired sooner. Some reverted to the “Act of God” rhetoric to externalize the disaster, and some even went so far as to describe the Hurricane as an example of God’s vengeance, punishing the supposed hedonism of New Orleans. Invoking this rhetoric and also free enterprise ideals, U.S. Representative Richard Baker of Baton Rouge offered the now infamous assessment of the situation: “We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn’t do it, but God did.” Many heaped blame on local and federal bureaucrats for the delayed evacuation orders and rescues. Parenthetically, there was much back and forth between state and federal governments about blame and responsibility. Hilgartner forecasts in his article that

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356 Hilgartner, "Overflow and Containment in the Aftermath of Disaster," 156.
357 Michael Eric Dyson, Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster (New York Basic Civitas, 2007), 181.
“although some officials will pay a political price, ultimately, the disaster will be
discursively contained within conventional narratives about 'bad management' and
'government inefficiency.'”

Indeed, “Criticism of Government Response to Hurricane Katrina” has its own, very robust Wikipedia page. There were also
government casualties, like Michael Brown, the head of FEMA when Katrina struck,
who resigned in disgrace; Hurricane Katrina is also widely considered to be a major
faux pas of the Bush administration. Beyond government inefficiency, Hurricane
Katrina was also framed as an environmental and social justice crisis. Concerned
observers, including many civil rights leaders and Hurricane survivors, highlighted
the unequal impacts of the disaster, noting that it was low-lying communities like the
largely black Lower Ninth Ward that suffered the most destructive flooding. A
majority of those remaining in the city after calls for evacuation were African
American and elderly, in many cases trapped by poverty or lack of access to
transportation. Many of those left in the city languished for days waiting for rescue
on rooftops or in the Superdome. The militarized response (deployment of the
National Guard) and comparisons of New Orleans to a warzone also came under fire
for apparent racial bias. Given the myriad narratives that emerged attempting to
make sense of Katrina, the following section takes a more targeted approach in
analyzing the different representations and definitions of victims of the Hurricane.

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359 Hilgartner, "Overflow and Containment in the Aftermath of Disaster," 156.
360 Julie Sze. "Toxic Soup Redux: Why Environmental Racism and Environmental Justice
Matter after Katrina." Understanding Katrina: Perspectives from the Social Sciences. Social
http://understandingkatrina.ssrc.org/Sze/
361 Dan Berger, "Constructing Crime, Framing Disaster: Routines of Criminalization and
Representing Hurricane Katrina’s Victims… as “Refugees”

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, what to call the people displaced and affected by the storm presented challenges for reporters and observers. “It’s as if the language, too, was unprepared” observed Dave Davies of NPR, who introduced Geoff Nunberg, a linguist at Stanford, to offer his expert opinion about what to call the hurricane survivors (evacuees, refugees, internally displaced persons?). Nunberg elegantly explained the limits of language to contain disaster: “The levees around New Orleans were not the only things that broke down in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. The language seemed to be giving in, too.” In the days and weeks after the disaster, media coverage was constant, but the appropriate description for people displaced by the hurricane was publicly negotiated. Particularly contentious was the application of the word “refugee” to describe the Katrina’s victims. By contrast, the use of the term “refugee” to describe survivors of the Flood of 1927 was rather benign. One factor for the shift in sentiment about the word may be that the legal definition was codified in the intervening period; “after the Geneva convention on the status of refugees in 1951, refugee continued to be used by the New York Times as a label for Americans[...]However […] its use appears to have lessened significantly across the years.” In the first week after the hurricane, many media outlets used the term “refugee” to describe Katrina’s victims, which was met with much criticism. Technically, the term “refugee” is inaccurate because, as noted, the legal definition of

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362 Geoff Nunberg, Choosing Your Terms: The Language of Katrina, podcast audio, Fresh Air, September 8, 2005.
363 Ibid.
365 Ibid., 28.
refugee has requirements of persecution and displacement outside national borders, but many objected more to the implication. Linguist Geoff Nunberg asserted that “internally displaced person” would be most accurate, but the word might seem sterile and “bureaucratic” to many.366 While there are questions of linguistic accuracy, there were also concerns about the connotation of the term “refugee.”

Prominent in the objections were accusations that the word “refugee” had an othering or “less than” connotation, a perception of foreignness.367 The charges of racial discrimination in the government’s response to Katrina also added a layer to the concerns and frustrations about alienating the survivors of the disaster. Many black leaders and displaced black New Orleanians, objected to the term, calling it “racist.” In a September 7, 2005 interview on MSNBC, Jesse Jackson emphatically explained: "Point one. We are not "refugees." That in itself is racist language. We are American citizens. We are not refugees. We are citizens who have not been well served by our government."368 And a Los Angeles Times article quoted Bruce Gordon, president of the NAACP, asserting that the word demoted Hurricane victims "to a level that is below citizenship."369 Many survivors also voiced their objections to the word “refugee.”370 New Orleans evacuee Daphne Carr, 37, commented "I'm not a refugee; I'm an American.”371 In Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster, a reflection about racial inequality and Hurricane Katrina, author Michael

366 Nunberg, Choosing Your Terms: The Language of Katrina.
368 Jesse Jackson, interview by Allison Stewart, 2005.
369 Ibid.
371 Ibid.
Eric Dyson discusses the fraught terminology applied to victims of the Hurricane. Responding to those who sought to justify the term “refugee,” he writes: “But what such clarifications missed is the spiritual truth of black identity that rested more in connotation than denotation, more in signification than grammar.”

In the years since the Mississippi Flood of 1927, the word “refugee” has transformed from a standard and acceptable term to one that was perceived as “inaccurate and potentially insensitive” for application to American citizens after Katrina. In the intervening years, some people have come to associate the term “refugee” with strangers in impoverished countries. One Katrina evacuee, Tyrone Mcknight, reflected on the word and his objections to it: "The image I have in my mind is people in a Third World country, the babies in Africa that have all the flies and are starving to death,” adding, “That's not me. I'm a law-abiding citizen who's working every day and paying taxes.” Adeline Masquelier, an anthropologist at Tulane, analyzed such responses: “Katrina's victims had no power to deflect the cameras' glare on their misery and destitution but they could use that glare to denounce publicly the language of prejudice [like “refugee”] that had come to define them once again as social misfits.” While the complaints of Katrina survivors about feeling othered by the word are legitimate, and reporters should respect the right of displaced peoples to define their identity, some of the objections to the term seem to imply that “real” (by the legal definition) refugees were somehow less deserving of

372 Michael Eric Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster* (New York Basic Civitas, 2007), 176.
374 Ibid.
sympathy. The Washington Post, in an article explaining their decision to stop using the term “refugee” in reports on Katrina, quotes Lavinia Limon, president and chief executive of the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, who maintained, "Being a refugee should not be a pejorative term." She sympathized that the victims of Katrina did not fit the legal definition and, thus the term was not accurate, but was clearly uncomfortable with what she perceived as a hostility towards refugees.

Parenthetically, refugees of other countries can become American citizens, of course. The charged debate about the use of the term “refugee” was, in some senses, resolved when many media outlets (like the New York Times and The Washington Post) stopped using it altogether. But if the language for describing displacement was, as Dave Davies, observed “unprepared” before Katrina, it’s unclear whether it will be any more prepared for the next disaster.

Criminalization of Survivors and the Militarization of Relief after Katrina

Aside from what to call those displaced and stranded by the Hurricane, the media struggled to describe the taking of food or supplies from stores in the flooded New Orleans. Was it “looting,” “taking,” “stealing,” “foraging,” “surviving”? Some observers critiqued some in the media for disproportionately describing the actions of black flood survivors as “looting without contextualizing it.” The now-infamous juxtaposition of two photographs of Katrina survivors wading through waste-deep dirty water, hauling food, provided what many perceived to be a clear example of

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376 Farhi, "Refugee": A Word of Trouble.
racial bias in media coverage. In the original captions by the Associated Press, the action of the white people is labeled as “finding,” while that of the black young man is described as “looting.”

**Figure 5.** Two images from the Associated Press, 2005. The top image, of a black young man hauling food through the water, is captioned as “looting,” which the same activity by the white people is labeled as “finding.” (From "Epic Loot." http://www.snopes.com/katrina/photos/looters.asp. Accessed March 21, 2017)

In “Speaking of Looting: An Analysis of Racial Propaganda in National Television Coverage of Hurricane Katrina,” authors Johnson, Dolan and Sonnett describe the results of their analysis of over 3,000 news clips, including 104 scenes of looting: “looting” rarely provided a space for the people shown to describe or contextualize their behavior. In the three cases in which reporters spoke to so-

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378 Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster*, 164.
called “looters,” all explained they were taking food or shoes out of necessity. Many scholars have argued that the language of looting was part of a broader trend of criminalizing flood survivors in order to justify the use of force. The “Speaking of Looting” article explains further that “Much of this [journalistic] commentary was critical of looters,” citing it as a factor in the supposed “anarchy” in New Orleans in the days after the Hurricane. Some even went so far as to compare the city to a warzone: “on August 30, 2005, CBS anchor Bob Schieffer, citing an unnamed source, likened New Orleans to ‘downtown Baghdad.’” Dan Berger, in his article “Constructing Crime, Framing Disaster: Routines of Criminalization and Crisis in Hurricane Katrina,” argues that journalists “criminalized much of the New Orleans population and suggested militarized policing and imprisonment as fundamental to restore order. Lacking credible sources, reporters relied on rumors and helped create a racialized ‘looter class.’” Later, such rumors of violence and disorder were found to be largely overblown. Using language that made Katrina’s survivors sound like violent, opportunistic criminals and likening the flooded city to a warzone all justified the deployment of armed National Guardsmen and the police. The situation is eerily similar to the militarized relief efforts during the Mississippi Flood of 1927. As noted earlier, in their Official Report, the American Red Cross praised the National Guard for “policing the refugee camps.”

380 Ibid., 313.
381 Ibid., 311.
382 Ibid.
Many of those displaced by Hurricane Katrina did not return home. For some this change was by choice, but for many others, economic barriers made rebuilding or returning difficult or impossible. The migration or relocation, or as some even termed it, the “diaspora” motivated by Hurricane Katrina highlights the ways in which the disaster could not be contained geographically. Although this thesis has sought to highlight the ways in which disasters like the Flood of 1927 and Hurricane Katrina cannot be contained neatly into a narrative frame and how their influence seeps into history, they are both relatively discrete disasters in the sense that the floodwaters arrived and eventually retreated. Unlike the floodwaters that gathered in homes and fields in the wake of the Mississippi Flood of 1927, the rising seas will not retreat, or as poet Martha Serpas so elegantly describes in “The Water,” the sea “won’t back down, take no or be denied.” How to frame and represent the slow motion disaster of the submersion of Lower Louisiana and permanent displacement present unique challenges for contemporary observers.

Framing Sea Level Rise and Representing Displacement

On May 5, 2016, the New York Times ran an article with the headline "Resettling the First American ‘Climate Refugees’” about the native community of Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw who call Isle de Jean Charles, an island in Southern

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Louisiana’s lower Terrebonne Parish, home.\textsuperscript{389} Situated 90 miles south of New Orleans, Isle de Jean Charles can claim a population of less than a hundred. Since the 1950s, the island has lost nearly 95\% of its land to encroaching water. As the only road to the mainland kept flooding and infrastructure protections became more expensive, in 2016, discussions finally “moved from mitigation to relocation.”\textsuperscript{390} The Department of Housing and Urban Development granted $48 million to relocate the entire community to higher ground.\textsuperscript{391} Some of the older residents in particular are reluctant to leave, expressing a deep connection to the island.\textsuperscript{392}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{Historic distribution of sediment to the Mississippi River Delta. (From John W. Day et al., "Restoration of the Mississippi Delta: Lessons from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita," \textit{Science} 315, no. 5819 (2007): 1697.)}
\end{figure}


\textsuperscript{391} Robertson, "Resettling the First American ‘Climate Refugees’."

\textsuperscript{392} Anne Lagamayo, "Climate Change Threatens to Wash Away Couple's History," \textit{CNN} March 2, 2017.
The subsidence of the island can be connected to the containment strategies for the Mississippi River catalyzed by the Flood of 1927. As noted, the Flood of 1927 inspired dramatic engineering projects to tame the Mississippi River once and for all, to facilitate commerce and prevent floods. While massive floods in 1937, 1965, and 1993, have revealed that the infrastructure is far from perfect, the engineering has been successful in channelizing the river and preventing sediment from flowing naturally. For thousands of years, the Mississippi River had delivered its sediment in lobe-like patterns to the Mississippi River Delta (Figure 5.2). Today, Louisiana loses 16 square miles of land annually, or more colloquially “a football field every hour,” to submersion. Several factors conspire to accelerate the submersion of these lands: the rising sea levels caused by anthropogenic climate change, subsidence caused by extensive oil and natural gas drilling off the Gulf Coast, and the lack of sediment delivery from the heavily engineered Mississippi River. Additionally, recent coastal infrastructure and protection projects have deemed protecting some islands, like Isle de Jean Charles, just too costly. Because of the intersecting factors contributing to the submersion of the Isle de Jean Charles, finding a narrative frame presents challenges. The New York Times includes the story in their “Carbon’s Casualties” series, along with other examples of anthropogenic climate change, which paints Isle de Jean Charles as one of the first areas in the United States to be sacrificed to the rising seas. The situation could just as easily be framed as an environmental justice issue or an

393 Klein and Zellmer, Mississippi River Tragedies: A Century of Unnatural Disaster.
395 Thomas Boiler. "The Drowning: A Big Picture View of the First Place in America Losing Its Battle against Climate Change (Isle De Jean Charles in Louisiana)." (Smithsonian Institution, 2016), 79.
example of Army Corps engineering decisions that prioritize some communities and commercial interests over others. Perhaps it’s best not to pick just one frame and, in so doing, recognize the complexity of the issue.

In addition to being connected by the Mississippi River, both the Flood of 1927 and submersion of lower Louisiana provide examples of prolonged disasters. In the 1927 Flood, rains began in September and the flooding spanned over the course of several months. The Red Cross considered the duration and pace of the 1927 Flood disaster advantageous as it provided a longer period for keeping focus on the disaster for fundraising purposes. Similarly, the submersion of lower Louisiana is happening in slow motion. Particularly apt here is Rob Nixon’s “slow violence” theory, which refers to the “delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.”396 In his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), Rob Nixon articulates the “invisibility” of slow motion disasters (like sea level rise or toxic drift) that are often difficult to document and thus do not receive attention or inspire a sense of urgency. He muses on documenting slow motion disasters in a way that is accessible and “dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment and warrant political intervention,” writing: “In an age when the media venerate the spectacular, when public policy is shaped primarily around perceived immediate need, a central question is strategic and representational: how can we convert into image and narrative the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making[…]?”397 Unlike the Flood of 1927398 and Hurricane Katrina,

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397 Ibid., 3.
which enjoyed nearly constant media coverage for weeks and months, the drama of
the displacement and sea level rise along the Gulf Coast, Alaskan shorelines, and
Florida wetlands receives the stray article at best. The case of Isle De Jean Charles
actually offers a visually striking case of rising sea levels:

![Figure 5.3](https://static01.nyt.com/images/2016/05/02/us/LOUISIANA12/LOUISIANA12-articleLarge-v2.jpg)

**Figure 5.3.** An aerial photograph of Isle de Jean Charles, which has lost 95% of its landmass
since the 1950s. A thin road is all that connects it to the mainland, but the road frequently
https://static01.nyt.com/images/2016/05/02/us/LOUISIANA12/LOUISIANA12-articleLarge-v2.jpg)

The *New York Times* article puts the phrase “climate refugee” in quotation
marks, perhaps because the term does not have a legal or accepted definition. It
should be noted there is some competition for the title of “first” climate refugee in the
United States. Several thousand miles away from Louisiana, coastal communities in
Alaska have been fighting the rising seas, too. The small native communities in
Shishmaref and Newtok has been on the frontlines of climate change and front pages
of many newspapers. Regardless of who was actually “first,” the Isle de Jean Charles has been framed as one of the first areas surrendered to rising seas. Beyond the representational challenges involved in visualizing and communicating the physical impacts of climate change and sea level rise, more generally, what to call those displaced by rising sea level is, linguistically speaking, uncharted waters.

“Climate refugees” or “ecological migrant” or something else?

Those who find their homes made uninhabitable by sea level rise or fields unplantable due to salinization may be forced to move, but they may not necessarily fit comfortably under the standard legal definition of “refugee.” How observers and journalists should describe those set in motion by changing climate and environmental disasters has been a source of debate. Ecological migrant? Climate refugee? Lester Brown, prominent environmentalist, first coined the term “environmental refugee” in the 1970s at the World Watch Institute. The “Environmentally Displaced People: Understanding the Linkages between Environmental Change, Livelihoods and Forced Migration Report” (2008) from Oxford’s Refugees Studies Centre, which articulates the challenges of defining the people displaced by environmental changes, provides a litany of potential terms:

Debates around linkages between environmental degradation and forced migration have led to the emergence of a range of highly contested terms – primarily *environmental refugee*, but also *environmental migrant, forced environmental migrant, environmentally motivated migrant, climate refugee, climate change refugee, environmentally displaced person (EDP), disaster refugee, environmental displacee, eco-refugee, ecological displaced person* and

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environmental refugee-to-be (ERTB). These terms have no accepted place in international refugee law, for environmental conditions do not constitute a basis for international protection. They are descriptive terms, not a status that confers obligations on States.\textsuperscript{402}

Even if they lack a legal definition, such descriptive terms can perhaps be helpful in translating the situation for observers. The United Nations High Commission on Refugees website acknowledges “Many of those who are displaced across borders as a result of climate change may not meet the refugee definition. Nevertheless, they are in need of protection and assistance.”\textsuperscript{403} There are some who object to using terms like environmental refugee, not because of the legal definition of refugee, but rather because the qualifier “environmental” may erase the human action that has contributed to the environmental change. In “Well Founded Fear: Social Ecology of 21st Century Refugees,” Jeremy Hein and Tarique Niazi ultimately refuse to endorse a term because it “can unintentionally naturalize refugees.”\textsuperscript{404} They conclude that “[i]n the end, putting adjectives before the word “refugee” or changing a definition is only an exercise in classification.”\textsuperscript{405} Classification, though, can still be important. Similarly Oxford’s Report quotes United Nations Environment and Human Security advisor Anthony Oliver-Smith’s objections to terms like “climate refugee”: it “tends to suggest that nature is at fault, when in fact humans are deeply implicated in the environmental changes that make life impossible in certain circumstances.”\textsuperscript{406} At this

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\textsuperscript{402} Ibid., 4.
\textsuperscript{405} Ibid.
moment, there appears to be no firm consensus about how to classify or represent those displaced by sea level rise or other environmental change.

Looking ahead

Given the ongoing nature (perhaps “unnatural nature” would be more accurate here) of anthropogenic climate change, a “conclusion” doesn’t feel like an appropriate way to end this chapter. Finding the suitable vocabulary, in definition and connotation, to describe those displaced by hurricanes, sea level rise, and other environmental change is still being negotiated. Putting the Flood of 1927 in dialogue with contemporary disasters, like Hurricane Katrina and the submersion of parts of lower Louisiana, demonstrates the continued representational challenges. Moving forward, journalists, public officials, scholars, and artists will no doubt continue to impose narrative frames on environmental disasters and attempt to contain displacement discursively. While framing, classification, and description are all important in translating and making sense of disaster and displacement, ultimately the most important concern is not representation, but response. Of course, representation deeply informs response. And how governments, humanitarian organizations, and citizens will respond to future large-scale environmental disasters and associated displacement is something only time will tell.
Conclusion

Representation and Preparation

In this conclusion, I do not seek to securely or neatly contain\textsuperscript{407} the story of the Mississippi Flood of 1927. This is not an excuse to leave threads untied, but rather an acknowledgement of the complexity involved in framing disasters and representing their victims. In addition to examining the construction of “official” state narratives like that from the Red Cross and disruptions of such narratives by the “black press,” in this thesis, I have also focused on long-term consequences of the Flood like black out-migration from the South and drawn connections to contemporary environmental disasters like Hurricane Katrina and the submersion of lower Louisiana. In so doing, I have attempted to expand the accepted historical narrative frame of the Flood of 1927. By their very nature, floods defy containment. And refusing to contain stories about floods into a clean narrative could be considered a form of “submersion subversion.”

Certainly, my framework for this thesis did not seek to contain all the important and necessary information. This paper has engaged broadly with issues of framing and representation, but there is always room for more and different analysis, for more articles, images, and details. In my eagerness to discuss language and framing, I am aware that I did not fully analyze all elements of the Flood, relevant history, and theory. This thesis has given the visual history of the Flood a gloss, but it is a rich subject matter that warrants continued consideration. There are myriad more avenues for further exploration and inquiry. I point this out to highlight that this thesis

\textsuperscript{407} Hilgartner, “Overflow and Containment in the Aftermath of Disaster.”
offers but a sliver of analysis in a larger constellation of scholarship about a pivotal moment in this nation’s history. The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 remains, like Twain’s assessment of the Mississippi River, “well worth reading about.” And writing about. And researching.

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As a young person and idealistic history major, eager and anxious to see environmental action and social justice, I selected the Flood of 1927 as a lens for thinking through anthropogenic climate change. Through the exploration of the framing of the Mississippi Flood of 1927 and the different representations of the people it displaced, I have endeavored to frame the story of the Flood and corresponding representational challenges as a valuable lesson for contemporary readers. The task of turning to the past can help us understand the present. It is not simply enough to “know” history to avoid repeating it; there must be an active and intentional response. With the reality of rising seas and forecasts of more eco-catastrophes, it is now more important than ever to turn to history to see how earlier disasters affected the American South and how various actors responded. As the fourth chapter illuminated, representational challenges in the wake of environmental disasters continue, which leaves many questions. How should we frame the slow motion drama of a changing climate to convey the appropriate sense of urgency? How should we define displacement and the people affected by disasters, while recognizing their agency and right to self-identify? If I may, I will now step onto the proverbial soapbox for just a moment…
Anthropogenic climate change is altering the environment and will accelerate the intensity and frequency of eco-catastrophes. As I write this in late March 2017, President Trump just signed an executive order undoing vital climate change prevention policies (like the Clean Power Plan). He and his administrators have expressed hostility toward necessary environmental regulations that protect the health and safety of current and future generations. Additionally, his proposed federal budget would gut the EPA. As is often the case, the burdens of such environmental deregulation will likely fall hardest on those with the fewest resources. And I shudder to think about the acceleration and amplification of pollution, carbon emissions, and sea level rise almost guaranteed by these shortsighted, dangerous, and economically unsound policies. While I am anxious about the current administration’s ability to respond to inequality and properly invest in disaster preparation and mitigation, I have faith in the American people, volunteers, activists, and many government workers to come together. Of course, those who leap into action in the wake of disasters should be applauded. As should those who work tirelessly to prevent disaster: the unsung heroes in engineering, city planning, and the people who do the routine maintenance of levees and other systems that keep us safe. Certainly, we must especially celebrate the community organizers, lawyers, educators, activists, and others who work to combat inequality and environmental injustice, to ensure that environmental disasters do not disproportionately burden already marginalized communities.

The journalists and historians who report on and write about environmental disasters, have a different, but vital role to play in all this as well. Their words and images shape the way we understand environmental disasters. How writers, artists, public officials, and organizations frame and represent disasters (their causes, consequences, and victims) profoundly informs the response. For example, if a disaster is framed as a reflection of systemic inequality, it requires a different response than a disaster deemed solely a product of technological failures.

The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 still has much to teach us, particularly in the Anthropocene. The unforeseen consequences of engineering the environment, the slow motion disaster of massive flooding, the persistent inequality in the American South—the Flood of 1927 and submersion of parts of the Gulf Coast share many of the same ingredients. I wrote my proposal for this project in Spring of 2016, hoping to connect the Flood with contemporary examples of sea level rise. While the project has expanded and evolved in the year since, to focus more on narrative containment and representation, the ultimate goal of mobilizing the past as a way of understanding the current moment has remained the same. In late March 2017, while polishing the historical literature review and doing a last minute search on Google to make sure I hadn’t missed any major works about the Flood, I discovered Susan Parrish’s *The Flood Year 1927: A Cultural History*, published two months earlier. Parrish’s book is beautifully written and discusses briefly the Flood’s symbolic importance in the age of the “Anthropocene.” In many ways her work was an affirmation; when it comes to climate change, the more people making connections and raising the alarm, the better. In an interview about her book, Parrish articulates powerfully the continued
“significance” of the Flood of 1927, or in other words, why we should keep studying and learning from it:

Because of the 21st-century ecocatastrophes we have already witnessed and future events caused or intensified by climate-change, we can now understand that how we communicate about environmental disaster and degradation is as important as how we communicate about war. Indeed, we can also see that when a nation doesn’t take into account all of its citizenry in its environmental management and disaster response, what may ensue is a kind of undeclared civil war. 2017 marks the 90th anniversary of the “Great Mississippi Flood,” but in many ways it anticipated—or inaugurated—our current moment. We live in an age in which human impact on the earth is indelibly intense. […] For the sake of history, it is important to appreciate that the Flood of 1927 represented perhaps the first major coincidence of the “Anthropocene” and what Guy Debord has termed the “Society of the Spectacle.”

I hope that more people will join in the dialogue and mobilize history to better understand how to mediate current and impending environmental disasters.

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As I have repeated so many times in this thesis: the story and consequences of the Flood of 1927 cannot be neatly contained. Displacement and migration, in particular, defy containment. The artistic interpretations and responses to the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 sought to contain experiences of flood victims, though in less absolute terms than state narratives. Bessie Smith’s “Backwater Blues,” though written early in the Flood, poignantly captured the chaos of the Flood and the displacement:

When it thunders and lightnin' and the wind begins to blow
There's thousands of people ain't got no place to go

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Her words serve as an important reminder. In this thesis, while sometimes I got wrapped up in analyzing “narrative frames” and definitions, I tried to never lose sight of the fact that these environmental disasters affected (and continue to affect) people’s lives.

Representation and response are deeply entangled. Certainly representations of displacement are important, but for the people affected, the response is more so. Now, more than ever, is essential to actively respond to the needs of migrants, refugees, and other displaced peoples, however they are defined and however they come to be uprooted, whether by sectarian violence, drought, poverty, or flood. In this moment, we (as citizens of the United States and the global community) must consider how to swiftly and compassionately respond to those millions “of people [who] ain’t got no place to go.”
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