
Introduction

One morning during the first week of May 1927, a publicist working for the American Red Cross boarded a small navy sea plane in Memphis and, as the sun rose, flew south along the Mississippi River to the city of Greenville. En route, from a vantage of three thousand feet, Taylor, the publicist, took in what he called “one of the most overwhelming tragedies nature has ever enacted.”¹ Since August 1926, a strange coincidence of intense weather events passing over the center of the North American continent had filled the tributaries of the Mississippi to bursting. Flooding had occurred in the western and northern parts of the watershed in the fall, and by early winter people were experiencing high water in the eastern tributaries as well. In March, below the juncture of the Ohio and the Mississippi, as all the swollen tributaries emptied into the Lower Mississippi simultaneously, levees started to falter in Arkansas and the boot-heel section of Missouri. Easter weekend brought storms to the Delta region. Only days later, on April 21, came the largest crevasse of the flood—indeed the largest in the river’s recorded history—in Mounds Landing, Mississippi. By this point, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* had called what was taking place in the alluvial basin south of Cairo the “most disastrous flood this country has ever had.”² Memphis’s paper the *Commercial Appeal* dubbed it the “greatest disaster that ever afflicted our country.”³ And a Louisiana newspaper, the *New Iberia Enterprise*, went as far as to say that this was “the greatest of all floods since the days of Noah.”⁴ Shortly after the April 21 break, “tragedy” began to turn into “scandal” as the nation’s leading African American weekly, the *Chicago Defender*, started to publish dispatches about the “race hate” its reporters were witnessing in the Red Cross camps.⁵ In Vicksburg on May 1, an evacuee was shot by a National Guardsman.⁶ A story in which nature had been the protagonist, and the antagonist, was turning ineluctably into a story about humans.

Since the break at Mounds Landing, Taylor had been holed up in Red Cross relief headquarters in Memphis, doing his part in what he saw as a tremendous

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battle waged against a “conquering invader” along a thousand-mile line from Cairo to the Gulf of Mexico. Ensnared in his office, Taylor perceived the Red Cross’s “huge relief machine function with a fascinating smoothness” as it rescued thousands from rooftops, trees, small bateaus, and disintegrating levees; as it delivered food with the same quick efficiency marshalled during wartime; and as it tackled the spread of disease through a massive public inoculation campaign. The template of the recent Great War in Europe, and in particular the nation’s feat of large-scale organization in the midst of wartime emergency, is one that Taylor readily brings to bear on the current—but this time American—catastrophe. Situated at the nerve center of this prodigious relief machine, Taylor relished his agency’s response as a remarkable modern mechanism in which sprawling and unpredictable circumstances could be connected and rationalized with the help of speedy communication and transportation technologies.⁷

But Taylor had yet to see the flood itself. That is what he intended to do on this early May morning. Flying south from Memphis, looking down from the sky, he began to notice little crowded islands of refugees, one full of animals “marooned and doomed” and surrounded by the carcasses of those that had already drowned. On a different island—likely a mound constructed for flood seasons by ancient inhabitants of the valley long before the arrival of Europeans—he made out human families but couldn’t tell whether their arm gestures were signals of distress. All around these islands, he saw nothing but opaque brown water. The whole scene, it seems, was still a bit abstract.⁸

Soon enough, the pilot landed the plane in the water just off of Greenville’s levee, a sliver of artificial land eight miles long with a crown only eight feet wide that had, in the past few days, become a precarious city of thirteen thousand.⁹ Situated just thirty miles south of the Mounds Landing break, the levee was all that separated this population from the river on the one side and the new inland sea that covered much of the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta on the other. Greenville itself, as one journalist wrote, had been “turned into a swirling Venice.”¹⁰ Disembarking from the plane, Taylor was quickly surrounded by hundreds of people, most of whom were African American. Up until his landing, all of these evacuees had represented to Taylor nothing other than a series of logistics challenges—they had been abstract pieces in a “stupendous chess game.” But he was about to be surprised. For it was not food, or medicine, or tents, or blankets that the people asked him for but rather information. The question on everyone’s lips was: “Did you bring any newspapers?” As he remembered it, when he admitted that he “never thought about them wanting newspapers,” everyone’s “spirits fell.”¹¹

Once they had recovered from their disappointment, the crowd turned Taylor, this emissary from headquarters, into a vector of news, asking question upon question. In particular, the evacuees wanted to know “what was going on in the outside world—whether the levees farther south had broken, or whether any of the proposed trans-Atlantic flights had started.”¹² Perhaps Taylor brought news that the water surging out of the Mississippi Delta at Vicksburg had caused large breaks on the Louisiana side of the river—that between this surge, and the water flowing over northern Louisiana from Arkansas, another inland sea was forming in the Sugar Bowl region of the Atchafalaya basin. Though Taylor could bring no information about transatlantic flights, it would be only a matter of days before news would, one way or another, reach this evacuated population that Charles Lindbergh had indeed made a successful solo flight to the other side of the Atlantic. While these men and women stood on the knife’s edge of an epic modern miscalculation—one that Gifford Pinchot would, a month later, call “the most colossal blunder in civilized history”¹³—and while they wanted to understand better the geography and the human toll of the disaster, this marooned population wanted nonetheless to participate in the nation’s, and the world’s, virtual witnessing of a signal technological achievement. Taylor had seen this crowd as a mass of bodies and bodily needs. He had not imagined them as consumers of globally significant information or as part of a contemporary public. Less still did he imagine this crowd—and crowds like them throughout the Delta—as poised to *produce and disseminate* meaning out of their experience. But that was exactly what happened in the days, months, and years to come.

If Lindbergh’s solo flight, mediated at a distance for a global audience, was one scenario of the modern, this haphazardly amassed population at a Red Cross camp was another. When we think about early twentieth-century catastrophes, we typically consider World War I, the financial collapse of 1929 along with the Great Depression, and the rise of fascism and genocide in Europe and the Near East. These have represented, and continue in our historical memory to represent, key problems of the modern age: mechanized combat and slaughter, unrestrained speculative capitalism, totalitarian governments, and the unstoppable global extension of crises. My conviction is that we are now prepared to see in this 1927 environmental disaster another signal, and abiding, problem of modern life. *The Flood Year 1927* brings eco-catastrophe into our discussions of modernity, its experiences, and its cultures. Rather than a blow-by-blow narrative of the event itself—a typical feature of disaster historiography—my book explores how this disaster took on form and meaning as it was nationally and internationally represented across multiple media platforms, both while the

flood moved inexorably southward and, subsequently, over the next two decades. I begin by looking at the social and environmental causes of the disaster, and by briefly describing the sociological certitudes of the 1920s into which it broke. I then investigate how this disaster went public, and made publics, as it was mediated through newspapers, radio, blues songs, and theater benefits. Finally, I look at how the flood comprises an important—but until now underappreciated—chapter in the history of literary modernism.

My immediate goal is for readers to understand what a major cultural phenomenon this was. Historians have so far uncovered the details of what happened, especially out of sight in the upper echelons of local and federal government, to cause the flood to unfold the way it did.¹⁴ Less work has been done, though, to explain how what was arguably the most publicly consuming environmental catastrophe of the twentieth century in the United States assumed public meaning. Disasters, as Kenneth Hewitt argues, tend in technocratic societies to be viewed as “unplanned holes” within essentially stable human-environmental relations when, in reality, they are crises brought on by and within everyday practices.¹⁵ They show not what is abnormal or accidental but rather what has *become* the norm coming invariably undone. Disasters, therefore, show us the unsustainable in the everyday and test whether cultural reserves exist for people to confront the breaches in—and thus redesign—these diurnal structures. The nation’s multifarious responses to the flood, therefore, indicate much about the United States in 1927 and, in particular, how unresolved the interregional and interracial crises leading up to the Civil War still were.

Many other events around this time bring these lingering crises to light: the Scopes Trial of 1925, for example, and the numerous urban race riots of 1919. What the flood uniquely allows us to see is how the “Nature” that stamped with inevitability definitions of races and regions, modernity and tradition—the “Nature” that grounded dominant U.S. social geography—was revealing itself to be a human invention with deep design flaws. Because the Mississippi watershed is a continental land feature funneling matter, and material practices, of the North, West, and East into the Gulf South, its hydro-geography turned the river’s Delta into a place that made national (and global) environmental regimes visible. That the river’s—or the levee system’s—engineering had been federally designed, moreover, made it politically effluent in yet another way. The Mississippi River has long been a “naturalcultural contact zone,” to use a phrase from Donna Haraway.¹⁶ But in 1927, as this techno-organic hybrid catastrophically faltered, each term within that “zone” and the history of their con-

tact seemed to demand a new and openly contested scrutiny. The river was a noisy medium, but everyone heard its blasts and murmurings differently.

My other goal, then, is to use this very concrete case study to encourage readers to meditate on a more elusive, abstract, but increasingly important issue, namely: *how do disasters become meaningful?* How do—and how should—humans communicate with themselves about politically charged ecocatastrophes? What are the stages through which mass-mediated societies encounter disaster? Do certain media entail better, or more productive, or more democratic epistemologies of crisis? What can we learn from 1927 about how to make transformative expression, and knowledge, out of disaster today and in the future? This flood was the first to occur in a “mediascape”¹⁷ enough like our own to make it a critical place to look to understand, and to consider modifying, our own contemporary modes of disaster communication and consumption. Moreover, the shape this disaster took—with extreme weather events, high waters, a faultily designed infrastructure, and poor, racially marked evacuees struggling in a southern resource frontier—increasingly characterizes the Global South in a present and future era of global climate change.

I started working on this project in the fall after the New Orleans levee disaster of 2005. Since that event, and the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, global attention has been drawn to a series of other environmental catastrophes: the Haiti earthquake of 2010, the BP oil spill of that same year, the 2011 Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster occurring in the wake of an earthquake and tsunami, and Superstorm Sandy of 2012. The Flood of 1927 likewise occurred within a stretch of years characterized by the deadliest spate of disasters in U.S. history to date, one that comprised 938 events, lasting from 1881 to 1928, years roughly coeval with the Second Industrial Revolution. Lowell Juilliard Carr, the sociologist studying the social consequences of catastrophe who produced this figure in 1932, was struck by their frequency in the United States, “where nature is supposed to be most completely subdued.” Such figures were enough, he surmised, to make us think twice about our “so-called conquest of nature.”¹⁸

Though these disaster-intensive periods—in the early twentieth century and early twenty-first century—are associated with different immediate causes, they can both be placed along a continuum within the new planetary epoch that scientists have recently dubbed “the Anthropocene,” a term meant to indicate the scope, intensity, and irreversibility of human alteration of planetary life begun around 1800 with intensive agriculture and deforestation, pollution, the combustion of fossil fuels, and other modern practices.¹⁹ This term indicates that we have started to conceptualize the human, the human’s relationship to

nature, and the human's relationship to historical periods anew. We may have thought that with the intensive reengineering of natural processes begun in the early modern period, humanity had graduated into eras marked solely by anthropocentric political, intellectual, technological, or economic change—the Age of Empire, the Age of Reason, the Industrial Age—but we find that these human “Ages” have actually produced a reimmersion in an environmental conception of selfhood, of limitations, and of ineluctable entanglement. We never transcended biological processes, never became more modern than they are.²⁰ Form is something that biology makes in, out of, and with us.

In the early modern period, Europeans stood knocking on the door of nature's “inner chambers” (to quote Francis Bacon), believing nature to be a fairly fixed and ultimately knowable thing.²¹ An entire Euro-Western epistemology was built around the belief that human alteration of natural environments improved and reclaimed nature to its destined purpose. Science seemed to abet humanity's material life, to quell humanity's ancient susceptibility to accident. And upon material liberation rested the Enlightenment's claim for science's role as political liberator.²² In this way, a belief in a limit-imposing natural order was replaced by a trust in human design.²³ Now, in the twenty-first century, we stand surrounded by a “second nature,”²⁴ a dynamic creature partly of our making whose behavior is no more predictable for that. Ulrich Beck has described this shift—from Enlightenment's faith in our human ability to reengineer nature to make life more secure to a more recent sense that modernization has made us all *less* secure—as a transition from a “science society” to a “Risk Society,” a shift he associates with the first use of nuclear weapons in 1945. Risks after this year no longer “accumulated . . . at the bottom” but became so generally sensed that a revolution in thinking about scientifically produced danger occurred. The sciences then entered “the reflexive phase” as their “*claim to enlightenment was demystified*.”²⁵ The Great Mississippi Flood allows us to see that almost two decades before 1945, science was being publicly associated with a “colossal blunder,” and “risk” was already making its appearance as the new norm in some intellectual circles. It also shows us that in this new order, the consequences of risk would continue—against Beck's theorization—to be unequally distributed.²⁶ Moreover, those at “the bottom” in the rural South had never felt themselves to be living in a “science society” and thus perceived technological failure in the Great Flood differently. Given such modern conditions, in which “the human” has achieved a new mixture of intense agency (engraving its practices on the biosphere with geological force and duration) and intense vulnerability (as we find our everyday consciousnesses, knowledge-making processes, and political structures now outmoded in this crunch time of poten-

tial irreversibility) without the intellectual traditions to understand what this uneven agency means,²⁷ it seems appropriate to place this 1927 event within a new kind of timeline, or narrative, of human/natural history representing the emergence of the Anthropocene. The contours of the 1927 disaster—its racial and regional manifestations, its political and media handling, its repercussions to human conceptions of self—show us what life within the Anthropocene has become. We see in the 1920s an early arrival of a “Risk Society,” but different from the one Beck described.

Within such a narrative, some things that once looked peripheral now seem central. Some people who once seemed lost to history now seem to be key participants in it. Inhabitants of the Delta in 1927—white planters but even more so poor whites and African Americans—were imagined by the rest of the country to be historically retrograde, caught in “Lost Cause” nostalgia, outmoded Christian fundamentalism, or feudal social and labor relations. The Harlem Renaissance spokesman Alain Locke, for example, described the northward migration of southern blacks to be not only a geographical move “from countryside to city” but also a temporal move forward “from Medieval America to modern.”²⁸ Northern pundit H. L. Mencken imagined all southerners to represent “a hostile tribe on our borders,”²⁹ as if they were a throwback to the barbarian hordes. Sociologist Georg Simmel was one among many who characterized the small-town and rural inhabitant as “emotional,” as “rooted in the unconscious levels of the mind [which] develop most readily in the steady equilibrium of unbroken customs”; he contrasted this figure with the “metropolitan type” whose “intensification of consciousness” is brought on by “the profound disruption with which the fluctuations and discontinuities of the external milieu threaten” him.³⁰ And recall Taylor’s surprise that the crowd on the levee wanted newspapers, let alone news about cutting-edge aviation.

To combat such views typical of metropolitan commentators, historians of the Western Hemisphere plantation zone (stretching from Maryland to the northern part of South America) have built an argument since the 1940s that the plantation was one of the first modern places on earth. Sugar colonies housed one of the first forms of factory production; migrant and multicultural populations from around the Atlantic world produced together, and against each other, creole cultures alongside a new construct of race, and race-based slavery; landscapes were quickly obliterated to produce monoculture crops for a world market, bringing on both environmental turmoil and a dawning ecological awareness;³¹ and financial speculation attached to commodified labor and plants produced the profits that would launch industrialism.³² In other words, modernity is marked not only by industrialization, urbanization, mass

consumerism, and mass mediation in nineteenth-century North Atlantic centers but also by the production of cash crops for a world market in which poor, racially marked laborers are rendered vulnerable by their being caught in a degraded environment that their labor has helped to alter, a phenomenon begun in the plantation zone in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.³³ Modernity not only is a threshold entered through technological and political progress but also consists of new experiences of dislocation, reification, vulnerability, and creolization within a “second nature.”³⁴

In 1927, the almost exclusively African American population that Taylor encountered was not only holding out on a man-made levee. As the source of cotton labor, they had been prevented, by the planter interest, from evacuating onto an empty rescue barge and were later, by the National Guard, kept from flight and forced to work in what the Red Cross called a “concentration camp.”³⁵ The term “concentration camp” had first come into use in the suppression of colonial insurrections some thirty years earlier in Cuba and South Africa.³⁶ Its most horrific application, of course, would begin in Nazi Germany six years after the flood, in 1933. Giorgio Agamben has controversially described the concentration camp as “the hidden paradigm of the political space of modernity” because it combines the state’s inherent totalitarian potential with its ostensible role in regulating the health and security of its population.³⁷ And yet, as a consideration of these 1927 Delta concentration camps indicates, there is a distinct history to the American, as opposed to the European, version of biological management. Michel Foucault has argued that governments from the late eighteenth century forward began to assume a “biopolitical” function, addressing subjects at a mass scale and attempting to “control the random element in biological processes”—birth and mortality rates, contagion, environmental instability—by maintaining an “overall equilibrium” through “complex systems of coordination.” And yet this new regulatory function of government continued to coexist with an older, disciplinary “right of the sword.” The Nazi death camps used old sovereign power perversely to kill citizens under the logic of maintaining social welfare; Nazi “biopower” distorted the Darwinian theory of evolution to imagine that the “death of the bad race . . . is something that will make life in general healthier.”³⁸

A different biopolitical history pertained in the American plantation zone. There, governmental control over “the random element in biological processes” did not “become racist” in the twentieth century. Rather, plantation powers had invented race in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to make a buffer zone between itself and this biological uncertainty.³⁹ Bodies marked as “black” and physical labor became fused categories, while “whiteness” established dis-

tance from a host of biological perils through this labor tool. Whites protected themselves, their property, and the category of whiteness itself by positioning black bodies to absorb various manifestations of biological chance: pest infestations, unpredictable weather, infertile soil, tropical earthquakes, fluctuating crop yields, contagious disease, unexpected fires in sugar manufacture, and risky oceanic transit. Within European biopolitics, governments used probabilistic reasoning to mitigate biological and other forms of chance for an *entire* population; plantation powers, by contrast, designed one part of the population to protect the other.⁴⁰ Agricultural laborers always, to a certain extent, perform this buffering function for landholders, but in the American plantation zone, where for centuries the laborer's body and bodily reproduction were owned, and where that body's "nature" was concocted by its owner, people of African descent came to assume an unusually absolute function of being that nature which protected another class of people from nature's unpredictability.⁴¹

In the 1927 Delta concentration camps, then, neither southern planters nor cooperating institutions like the National Guard and the Red Cross could have imagined that white health could be achieved through the total "death of the bad race." Though scores of individual black people were, in the decades leading up to 1927, ritualistically killed on the pretext of keeping black and white lineage apart, the planter interest was keenly aware that the region's economic health utterly depended upon the continuing life and proximity of black labor. The Red Cross concentration camps were—to modify Agamben's phrase—a political space of rural plantation modernity. And as blacks went from being inoculated in camps to reinforcing levees, their role as a living buffer zone between whites and nature's dangerous vagaries was made literally manifest.

What I plan to make clear in this book is that for African American rural laborers, existing in this strange zone—having had their own "second nature" defined by others while being forced into an intimacy with an unpredictable plantation nature mostly of their own physical creation—also allowed these laborers to know their environment with great empirical acumen. This deep experiential knowledge, however, made as it was in a Jim Crow society, did not earn the status of rationality. Rural, southern rural, and especially black southern rural people were understood by metropolitan commentators to be fossilized and curious specimens of a pre-Enlightenment epistemology when in fact plantation laborers had a long history of seeing modernity's limitations, costs, and dangers. Though we have recognized the metropolitan artists and pundits in the North Atlantic who communicated the disintegration—during and between the world wars—of Enlightenment-seeded modern projects (like democratic rationality, or the European imperial order), we have little understood

how this rural, southern, American crisis of 1927 produced a separate but equally significant response to modernity's troubles.⁴²

Paul Gilroy, extending the work of the Caribbeanist scholars mentioned earlier, made the case some twenty years ago in his book *The Black Atlantic* for reenvisioning modernity as not an exclusively European product. He urged that scholars assume the “transnational and intercultural perspective,” represented by a broader Atlantic geography, to grasp how modernity emerged in an “intimate association” with slavery, colonialism, and scientific racism.⁴³ Jace Weaver has recently mapped out the existence of a corresponding “Red Atlantic” by tracing the importance of indigenous Americans to the growth of the trade, technology, and political modeling that helped create the modern West.⁴⁴ Despite the critical importance of this recovery of an intercultural Atlantic history, we still need to focus more attention on the particular insights that non-Europeans contributed on the subject of the drastic environmental changes that occurred in the Atlantic world alongside colonialism and the establishment of plantations.⁴⁵ Environmental justice scholarship, the New Orleans levee disaster, and the increasingly visible overlay of global climate change hotspots with old maps of extractive empire put scholars in a position today to hear in the archives of Atlantic history the green inflection in which the “dissident assessment” of modernity has taken place.⁴⁶ We can hear in the archives not only a political critique of the failures of the Enlightenment project of universal liberation but also an environmental critique of the Enlightenment project of reducing Nature to an instrument of human profit. If the ship was the key “chronotope” of Gilroy's study, the *raft*—understood as a catchall for any makeshift floating device, like a downed airplane, coffin, piece of roof, or stolen rowboat—is the chronotope of this one.⁴⁷ While the ship represented for Gilroy the purposive circuits of an exploitative but materially and culturally burgeoning modernity, the raft, which reappears again and again in the 1927 flood archives, indicates to me how underresourced and colonized people around the globe have been the first to need to improvise structures for survival in the wake of material depletion.

One reason I raise this issue of a multicentered and eco-literate modernity is to establish at the outset that the flood zone in the Lower Mississippi Valley was by no means a disconnected, peculiar, remote hinterland, as words like “bottomlands,” “Deep South,” and “Medieval” suggest and as the customary location of this material in the disciplinary subfield of “Southern Studies” might indicate.⁴⁸ Global trade connections between the Delta and the “cottonopolis” of Manchester, England—including the fact that the largest cotton plantation in the world was located in the Delta and owned by a Manchester company⁴⁹—

meant that the *Manchester Guardian* followed the flood more carefully than many a U.S. paper.⁵⁰ New Orleans was a major shipping and banking center, a strategic nexus in a worldwide circuit of goods and capital. Herbert Hoover, the commerce secretary put in charge of rescue and relief efforts by President Calvin Coolidge, transposed to the Delta his experience managing the health of a mass population of Europeans during and after wartime. Many reporters sent to cover the flood brought with them their memory of the battlefields of Europe. Southern Vaudevillians most important to disaster fund-raising—like Will Rogers—had spent their careers in international entertainment circuits. The authors who thought most deeply and critically about this flood, William Faulkner and Richard Wright, engaged with the aesthetics of European leftist artists and intellectuals to draw out the resonances between convulsions overseas and convulsions at home. Thus, in terms both material and cultural, the Delta flood zone was fully enmeshed in a contemporaneous global skein.

Taylor, the publicist, described the flood as a “tragedy” that “nature had enacted.” In fact, the unpredictable, and temporarily destructive, features natural to any river had been severely exacerbated by industrial-scale alterations of the watershed taking place since the nineteenth century. As I explain in chapter 1, deforestation, wetlands drainage, and monoculture farming seriously reduced the storage capacity of the watershed’s soil. Added to this intense environmental alteration, designers of the flood protection system elected *not* to mimic an alluvial basin’s own mechanisms for slowing water’s movement and for holding and dispersing water in times of overflow. They decided instead to straighten and impound the river within a towering levee system. In the decades before the flood, then, Euro- and African Americans had gradually transformed a natural disturbance-maintained regime, characterized by periodic overflows, into a massive hydraulic mechanism—what one Mississippi journalist called a “trough aqeduct [*sic*]” rolling like “an elevated railroad” high above the land—that, when breached, could cause catastrophic damage.⁵¹ Because modern engineering, agriculture, and silviculture all coalesced in their misapprehension of the complex behavior of the watershed, this catastrophe was significant as a very public science experiment, and a highly leveraged resource extraction enterprise, gone wrong. To put it in the terms of the “biopolitical” discussed a moment ago, the U.S. government, combined with timber and agricultural interests, had sought to “control the random element in biological processes” by turning the river into a rationalized drainage pipe but, in so doing, managed to turn the river into an even more unpredictable cataract.⁵²

The mediation producing this flood for the public was distinctly new. Unlike the deadlier U.S. floods in Johnstown, Pennsylvania (1889), Galveston, Texas

(1900), and the Lake Okeechobee area of Florida (1928), which all occurred in a matter of hours, this flood moved so slowly and lasted so long—Faulkner would call it “the flood year 1927”⁵³—that national audiences could be pulled in, through newly established media circuits, to the events as they occurred. Indeed, real-time, virtual disaster consumption began with this flood. Moreover, because no Federal Emergency Management Association (FEMA) yet existed, and because Congress refused to convene to appropriate emergency funds, all money for relief efforts had to be raised from that virtual national audience. Indeed, the word “audience” fails to capture the ways in which citizens from Los Angeles to New York City participated in the prolonged event, for the public linked together by the catastrophe mattered to—and actually altered—its unfolding.

The speed with which the media could shape public perception of what was occurring in the Delta was a product of some quite recent innovations in communication and transport technologies. Taylor, for example, described the various technologies put into use on April 25 to connect the chaotic stretches of the Lower Mississippi: “Telephones frantically ringing; a wireless sputtering incessantly . . . ; aviators rushing in to report new levee breaks; . . . Leased wires to Vicksburg, Natchez, Baton Rouge, New Orleans, Alexandria . . . bringing in every minute of the day and night news of overwhelming disasters.”⁵⁴ While wired telegraphy was some ninety years old, the other means of communication were phenomena of only the preceding decades. Radio had gone national only weeks before, thanks to Hoover. All of this information pulsing through his office, Taylor suggests, was answered with commensurate dispatches of relief, making the headquarters “busy, throbbing, humming, [and] noisy.”⁵⁵ Combined with these technologies, other media such as newsprint, musical recordings, and film were charged into service to, as the Red Cross’s director of public information put it, “mobilize the resources of the entire nation in behalf of [this] disaster-stricken population.”⁵⁶ Indeed, as I discuss in chapter 4, this “super-flood”⁵⁷ was so protracted and media technologies so swift that Bessie Smith’s “Back-Water Blues”—the song that became *the* ballad of the flood—was inspired by personal experience, written, sung, and etched onto a wax disc, then advertised in white and black newspapers in both the North and South, purchased, and set on Victrolas *two and three months later* by listeners in the Delta, just as the flood crest was ponderously working its way down the Lower Mississippi.

This new combination of swift mediation and protracted calamity allows us to witness an early version of what Rob Nixon recently termed “slow violence.” By this phrase, he characterizes environmentally linked distress that occurs

“gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space,” and, as such, “is typically not viewed as violence at all.”⁵⁸ Taking the phenomena of the toxic drift and the biomagnification of DDT, warned about in 1962 by Rachel Carson, as an origin point of this late modern environmental reality, Nixon distinguishes it from the fast and sublime spectacles that contemporary media traffic in.⁵⁹

Between these two models, the 1927 flood offers a hybrid case. Though media producers—from journalists to carnival exhibition designers—tried to quickly package this flood as the dazzling spectacle that, for example, the Galveston deluge seemed to have been, it was too slow to satisfy consumers who had been thrilled by scenes of swift destruction since the beginning of the century. Though the flood’s pace was narratively advantageous at first—allowing the public to feel the suspense of an unfolding event—it wasn’t long before this protracted cyclicalality became a communications problem. Along the Mississippi, levees broke, and broke, and kept breaking. Flooded acres and numbers of evacuees were counted and, the following week, counted again. After about two months, media pundits started to complain about the “iteration of the same sequence”⁶⁰ and invoked Aristotle’s rule of dramatic unities to pronounce this disaster aesthetically unsatisfying. It was just too sprawling and repetitive. Moreover, much early hype about the flood uncoupled it from human causation. Also like the contemporary instances of slow violence that Nixon describes, this earlier flood occurred in a “resource-rich, regulation-poor, war-fractured societ[y].” It, too, induced the widespread problem of “displacement without moving.”⁶¹ And it, too, raises the critical question of how those afflicted by, or close to, the submerged and drawn-out violence of the Delta experience were able to make matters visible to a distant—and increasingly disaffected and attention-sapped—audience.

Though many journalists, like Taylor, represented the flood as a deliberate natural onslaught, and though many ministers attributed the flood to God’s anger, the Flood of 1927 was noteworthy in that it eventually was hailed as a humanly caused calamity. Unlike the Johnstown and Okeechobee floods, both also man-made disasters, in which the powerful industrialists involved in the first case and the Florida boosters in the second sought to avoid publicity, in 1927 southerners with access to the national media determined to bring attention to the flood—and to its human causes. White southerners saw it as a fully political event and made that point heard. Just two years after the Scopes “Monkey” Trial, when the categories “southern,” “fundamentalism,” and “anti-science” were fused together in the national mind—when outsiders believed that for every southerner, “The earth is God’s stage,” as Wilbur J. Cash would

quip⁶²—it was primarily southern editorials that deciphered and declared the human role in the flood. In particular, pundits argued, the federal government had failed miserably in its management of a watershed covering two-thirds of the nation, and it was the South that, yet again, suffered.

Moreover, because the course of the flood moved from north to south, retracing the 1863 river-borne assault on the Confederate strongholds of Mississippi and Louisiana, this flood had the peculiar power to make sixty-four-year-old history feel unfinished—to make it feel even biologically reenacted. Many in the white Delta looked at the water destroying their crops, scattering “their” labor, drowning their animals, and sinking them into greater debt, and saw it as Yankee water. Southerners in states farther away from the river had sympathy for such a position.

Advocates for southern black farm laborers likewise found old politics written all over the flood. 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 northern institutions were abetting its reestablishment. W.E.B. Du Bois, for example, in an editorial he wrote for the NAACP’s *Crisis* magazine, would place a caption that read “The Slave Ship, 1927” beneath a photograph of a rescue barge moving down the Mississippi. A *Pittsburgh Courier* editorial declared: “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.”⁶³ Ida B. Wells, Walter White, William Pickens, Jesse O. Thomas, and others made similar public analyses. The white South convinced many beyond their borders to take up their view, while the black press faced a harder time reaching across the color line to make their case more broadly.

White Americans in the North and West were also quick to summon memories of the Civil War as a way to involve themselves in the South’s current battle. Imaginatively reenacting the 1860s conflict allowed them not only to revisit a victory but also to rewrite the terms of that victory. Instead of the destroyers of a plantation splendor they themselves had come to romanticize and feel nostalgia for, whites in the North and West of the country cast themselves, in the words of the *New York Times*, as “an army of rescuers.”⁶⁴ The northern invader was, in Herbert Hoover’s nationwide radio address, reenvisioned as a “water enemy” attacking “the people of our south,” against which “the engineers” and “strong and experienced men from every important center” were “directing” a “great battle.”⁶⁵ Administering to their needy white brethren would help heal old wounds and return accord to the national house. White southerners found such noblesse oblige and such belated engineering and professional acumen

from the North—including the role-playing it involved—to be dim-witted and aggravating. In a surprising inversion of the cultural geography, the white South was using science to demand increased federal involvement in Dixie while the North and West dwelled in their own chivalric reverie.⁶⁶ Though the death toll from the flood was more limited than that of other twentieth-century environmental disasters, it was the way that this flood—for northern, southern, white, and black publics—uncannily rematerialized the defining American nightmares of slavery and civil war that made it so culturally engulfing.

This disaster produced a complex configuration of overlapping and contending reading and listening publics who made meaning out of the event in a variety of ways (the subject of chapters 2 and 3). Added to this virtual print and auditory realm, thousands of people, inside and outside the South, gathered in live rituals of gift-giving. “Monster Benefits” were staged in Hollywood, Atlanta, Chicago, Boston, New York, and New Orleans. People put on circuses in Indiana, amateur theatricals in D.C., an opera concert aboard a transatlantic ocean liner, and boxing benefits in Rhode Island. Of all, the most typical, and successful, type of benefit performance was delivered in the Vaudeville variety mode. Without knowing that this was Vaudeville’s dying gasp, performers—from blues singers to comedians to escape artists—offered venues in which spectators around the nation could and did think about the South, about race in America, about media consumption, and about the environmental politics of the flood.

Many of these Vaudeville fund-raiser acts appearing outside the South centered on a predictable minstrel invocation of a lovable, pitiable, and risible Dixie. To the contrary, as I explain in chapter 5, Vaudevillians who found themselves caught within the flood zone practiced a meaningful and participatory “environmental theatre” for the surrounding communities.⁶⁷ Up north, the Vaudevillians who hailed from the South but had traveled the national and international circuits of the live entertainment industry brought to their benefit acts the kind of experience that afforded them a distinct acumen. The “Cowboy humorist” and fancy roper Will Rogers, son of a man who was both a Confederate soldier and a Cherokee leader in Oklahoma Territory, raised more money for flood victims than any other individual. Through his daily newspaper columns and his gala appearances in New Orleans and New York City, he mustered a national response that was critical and sentimental at the same time. Rogers managed simultaneously to cajole, accuse, and amuse his audiences as he encouraged them to feel the obligations of citizenship. The black comedians Aubrey Lyles and Flournoy Miller, raised in Tennessee just miles east of the flood zone, and crossover artists to white Broadway, were headliners in a

“Monster Vaudeville Benefit” at the Lafayette in Harlem, a theater that drew in both black and white audiences. Conveying their humor through something they called a “syncopated argument,” Miller and Lyles used a series of off-tempo swerves in logic, and the exaggerated ridiculing of ignorance, to trigger realizations in their audience about the hazards of black life in the United States. As audience members “got” their wit, they got to thinking, and relished the whole process enough to want more.

Contrary to the assumption that the most productive public encounter a society can have about its crises occurs through print media that encourage rational debate, I argue in chapter 5 that the history of performances surrounding the 1927 disaster suggests otherwise. The disembodied realm of the newspaper coupled with a disinterested form of reporting, in particular, have been understood to engage a reading public in a deliberative process that allows hidden truths to emerge. In such arguments, from Walter Lippmann to Jürgen Habermas, “entertainment” in general, and theater in particular, are believed to foster a passive and escapist stupor in a merely pleasure-seeking audience. The field of performance studies has, for the last few decades, been answering this antitheatrical prejudice on the part of theorists of the democratic public sphere by arguing for the many ways in which embodied performances make possible profound kinds of cultural reckonings and cognitive transformations. Historians of disaster have made the link between disaster and theater: they point out that these destabilizing events turn the societies in which they occur into a kind of enormous theater to stage “expiation” and thus “ward off danger and reestablish normality.” Print journalism, radio, and live performance were in 1927 *all* part of those ritual efforts to place blame and give gifts; rationality or irrationality was not particular to any one medium. And if disasters “lay bare the longue durée as a society mobilizes its deepest cultural reserves in response to a crisis in its habitual forms of real and symbolic exchange,”⁶⁸ then my study of how publics and individuals made meaning out of the Mississippi Flood of 1927 will help assess how the nation’s “deepest cultural reserves” reckoned with what was problematic in its “habitual forms” of economic, intellectual, and social life. I also contend that this crisis not only helped artists tap into existing “reserves” but even forced them to devise new questions, new thoughts, and new aesthetic strategies.

To put it another way: the Flood of 1927 had the ability to call into question key intellectual paradigms then in ascendance. There were widespread, cross-disciplinary scholarly and intellectual investments in the concept of *equilibrium* in this period. Derived from a conservative, nineteenth-century interpretation of Darwinian evolution, natural scientists developed a model that accounted

for biological changes over time by theorizing that such change was purposive and stabilizing. Nature complicated itself as it progressed, and this process actually created a more concordant, subtly interdependent, and stable world. Practitioners in the social sciences took up this concept of Nature's "patient self-rectification"⁶⁹ as a model for how human societies evolve and function. Thus sociologists who studied disaster in this period contended that such events worked like a therapeutic reset button, making social organisms more balanced and integrated. As it became increasingly clear during the spring of 1927 that two major American systems were designed for dangerous results, and kept producing calamity after calamity, whether in recurrent Mississippi floods or flares of Jim Crow violence, direct witnesses and distant commentators who followed the disaster closely articulated a vision of reality—an ontology—based upon chance, and a risk-based maneuvering within such chance, rather than upon equilibrium. They saw that in the plantation zone it was the laboring bodies of poor whites, and still more so poor blacks, that, as it were, absorbed risk itself. Their stories, acts, and songs asked the world to notice this sleight of hand too.

In the dozen years following the Mississippi flood, in the early but enduring work of Faulkner and Wright, these authors visited and revisited this flood and created out of it fictional worlds run on catastrophic coincidence, mad gaps in empirical processes, tricky currents skewing spatial and mental orientation, and new risk-centered forms of perception. This model of a more unpredictable, chance-driven, even chaotic world would not catch on in the field of ecology until the 1970s. Ahead of the shift in scientific paradigm, both Wright and Faulkner (as I argue in chapters 6 and 7) articulated this model as they braided together rural and small-town Mississippi experience, blues expression, the national mediation of the flood during 1927, and their contact with contemporary transatlantic intellectual, literary, and visual enterprises. While European literary modernism, Dada, Surrealism, and other avant-garde movements made their audiences think about war, industrialization, consumerism, and the rise of fascism, environmental catastrophe was not yet a major European cultural concern. Wright and Faulkner, by contrast, lived in a nation where "nature [wa]s supposed to be most completely subdued" but was in fact showing tumultuous signs of distress; they lived in "Nature's Nation" where risks had accumulated, geographically and socially, at the bottom.⁷⁰ Thus they brought to an evolving global Modernism a rural and cosmopolitan meditation on a new kind of catastrophic environmental consciousness.

Moving through various media—weather, river, radio, newspaper, live comedy act, recorded song, poem, novella, novel—this book does not stress a

distinction between Nature's event and humanity's culture, or between a human subject and his or her environs. Philosophically, I agree with John Dewey in his assertion that "environment is not something around and about human activities in an external sense; it is their *medium* or *milieu*."⁷¹ Conversely, the environment, or an evolving biology, takes us as its medium as well. There is no position outside the circuit. I therefore describe a decades-long "material-discursive" event in which "material phenomena" and "discursive practices" snag and crisscross and knot.⁷² When a levee broke in 1927, for example, it was simultaneously a biological phenomenon involving water and earth *and* a human expression involving technological design (the levee structure), environmental design (the transformation of the watershed), social design (the composition of laborers on the levee), and rhetorical design (the explanation and dissemination of the event). The various media mentioned earlier are not lined up like objects in space moving increasingly and distortingly away from some original truth of *what Nature did*. Rather, all these media, and the humans participating in them, converse with and affect and create each other.

As is clear in chapter 1, the work of trying to arrive at a baseline story of factual history relies itself on collaging letters, reports, newspaper accounts, committee investigations, and so on. In traditional historiography, the more "private" those media—a letter, for example, from one Red Cross official to another—the more revealing it is taken to be, thus establishing another dichotomy between *what actually happened* and *the public representation*, which is understood to be at a distortive remove from truth. Behind-the-scenes transactions of those in power *are* critical to understand. But we should not presume that such sequestered political power controls the sustained and broader cultural power of meaning-making. What this book offers, then, is not the "true history" of an event but rather—using the method that modernists employed to capture the simultaneity of variant truths across a social field—an arrayed account in which I investigate how groups, working across multiple media and genres, and often in conflict with each other, made the flood significant.⁷³

In contending that a major catastrophe offers us an exceptionally good opportunity to analyze social and cultural patterns of the Western world in 1927, I am not that unlike the sociologists in the 1920s and 1930s who performed case studies of disasters to understand how social organisms work.⁷⁴ Their premise, however, was that organisms are inherently self-stabilizing and that a disaster jolts that process into action by getting problems quickly out in the open to be solved. The social model I have derived from the archives of this flood is different: the flood did not galvanize into existence a newer, better balance (between humans and nature, black and white, North and South, wealthy

and poor), even if it did cause the federal government to rejigger the levee system. Instead, it suggested that nature's unpredictability could not be engineered into placidity. It suggested that catastrophe was the abiding, everyday reality of Jim Crow. It suggested that the gap between "problem-solvers and problem-laymen,"⁷⁵ between system designers operating at a distance from the consequences of their decisions and those who had a more direct and immersive experience of those consequences, had grown too vast. And it suggested that a paradigm shift was occurring, such that visions of equilibrium needed to make way for perceptions of, and strategies for negotiating, a world of unpredictable change. In the new Risk Society hailed by Beck, the sciences no longer monopolize rationality but instead make way for the claims of amateurs who can circulate these claims in a "*science, media and information society*."⁷⁶ When amateurs looked at this flood, they saw broken systems; when most technocrats and engineers did, they saw clues for tweaking the existing machinery.

The "problem-solver" par excellence of the 1927 flood, Herbert Hoover, was, as he admitted, "too busy really to see this flood at close range," engaged as he was with building up the "great relief machine." He regretted, for example, that a white composer "didn't write a plaintive dirge which the negro refugees might sing in the camps," calling it a "great oversight."⁷⁷ He somehow missed the fact that such an influential song *had* been written, and sung into history, by Bessie Smith and that dozens more had appeared during the spring months. If he neither saw nor heard nor read the other "problem-laymen" and laywomen of the flood—Will Rogers, Miller and Lyles, Richard Wright, and William Faulkner, along with numerous other Vaudevillians, singers, and journalists—we, at least, can encounter them now. And we can examine how they drew various publics into the orbits of their thinking. I wager they have something to teach us still.