

Shelter from the Storm:
Asylum in American Narratives of Natural Disaster

by

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Abstract

America's origin story depicts the nation as sanctuary incarnate. From the Puritans seeking religious refuge to generations of immigrants arriving at Ellis Island, to slaves fleeing north across the Ohio River, in the national imaginary America functions as asylum extant -- as the end of the story. This dissertation interrogates this iconic narrative at a critical historical moment. Reading narratives of natural disaster -- accounts of historical drought, flood, and hurricane -- it produces a nuanced theory of refuge which counters the myth of nationalized sanctuary. In an era of normative catastrophe, narratives of 'natural' disaster problematize the discourse of the nation-state as the exemplary guarantor of refuge. This theory of asylum constitutes a vital prehistory for increasingly urgent critical engagement with vulnerable citizenship and the emerging canon of eco-catastrophe narratives.

Chapter One examines the Dust Bowl as represented in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), Woody Guthrie's folk song 'This Land is Your Land' (1940) and documents of the National Park Service (1936). These disaster narratives demonstrate

that asylum is defined both by an inviolable border, and by imaginative expansion beyond that defensible perimeter to borderless, abstracted, and infinite refuge. Chapter Two examines the texts of the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927. Flood Relief Chairman Herbert Hoover's memoir (1952), President Calvin Coolidge's 1927 State of the Union Address as well as 'Saving the Day' (1928) -- a sermon by Rev. Sutton E. Griggs -- constitute a trenchant critique of the nationalized provision of refuge. Delving further into the 1927 flood, Chapter Three considers Richard Wright's short stories 'The Man Who Saw the Flood' (1937) and 'Down by the Riverside' (1938) as well as William Faulkner's novella *Old Man* (1939). These texts demonstrate how racialized asylum subverts the conventions of the disaster narrative's promise of catastrophic renewal. Concluding with a contemporary disaster, Chapter Four examines Dave Eggers' *Zeitoun* (2009), James Lee Burke's short story 'Jesus Out to Sea' (2006) and Spike Lee's documentary film *When the Levees Broke* (2006). In these Hurricane Katrina narratives, refuge's doubled nature is revealed, and asylum is re-configured as perilous as well as sheltering.

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Introduction

Seeking Refuge in "Nature's nation"

In the summer of 1635, a hurricane rushed up the Atlantic coast all the way to New England. William Bradford, the governor of the Pilgrim colony at Plymouth, recorded the storm and its severity in his journal:

Such a mighty storm of wind and rain as none living in these parts, either English or Indian, ever saw...It blew down sundry houses and uncovered others...It blew down many hundred thousands of trees, turning up the stronger by the roots and breaking the higher pine trees off in the middle...The signs and marks of it will remain this hundred years in these parts where it was soarest.

Here Bradford catalogues the damage wrought by the storm, recounting roofs torn from houses and trees torn up by their roots.¹ Having surveyed the disaster, the governor declared it unprecedented. "None living in these parts" had ever before seen such a storm. And the hurricane was unparalleled not merely according to the recently-arrived colonists, but also in the experience of the Native Americans, the original residents of the not-so New World. Bradford invokes the Aborigines as a legitimating primeval memory here. They substantiate the settlers' sense that this natural disaster was indeed catastrophic, was in fact unparalleled. The brief fifteen-year history of Plymouth colony is bolstered by the long history of the Natives, who are denoted here as the carriers of territorial memory. Bradford concludes his hurricane narrative with an assertion that the unprecedented storm was no passing phenomenon. For although the hurricane has dissipated, its scars endure: "The signs and marks of it will remain this hundred years in these parts where it was soarest." Even after the winds subside and the skies brighten,

¹ Nicholas Coch, a professor of geology at New York's Queens College, recently demonstrated the severity of the 1635 hurricane. He collected contemporary descriptions of the storm, noting that "the documentation was better than any hurricane until the mid-1800s. That's a story in itself." Coch then worked with the National Hurricane Center to create a computer model of the tempest, and concluded that the 1635 hurricane was the worst in the region's history until the deadly 1938 storm known as the Long Island Express. "It was an extraordinary event, a major hurricane," Coch asserts, "and nearly knocked out British culture in America."

natural disaster leaves behind a trace. The disaster endures. Its "signs and marks" convert colonial America's landscape to a hazard-scape, and then to a palimpsest which retains traces of the storm.

Bradford was not the only colonist to remark on the devastating storm of 1635. His fellow governor, John Winthrop of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, also recorded his impressions of the tempest. His colony only six years into settlement at the time of the hurricane, Winthrop shares Bradford's awe at the storm's ferocity. The tempest "blew with such violence, with abundance of rain, that it blew down many hundreds of trees, " Winthrop observes, "overthrew some houses, and drove the ships from their anchors" (155). Unlike Bradford, however, Winthrop depicts not just physical damage to homes and trees, but also recounts stories of settlers caught in the maelstrom:

In this tempest, the *James* of Bristol, having one hundred passengers, honest people of Yorkshire...was driven within a cable's length of the rocks...In the same tempest a bark of Mr. Allerton's was cast away upon Cape Ann, and twenty-one persons drowned...None were saved but one Mr. Thatcher and his wife who were cast on shore and preserved by a powder horn and a bag with a flint, and a goat and a cheese...and some other necessities: and the third day after a shallop came thither to look for another shallop, which was missing in the storm, and so they were preserved. So as there did appear a miraculous providence in their preservation. (164, 165)

Winthrop tells of colonists lost in the storm as well as several near-fatal close calls. In one miraculous escape, the *James* sails within "a cable's length of the rocks" and certain disaster. Yet the ship avoids catastrophe, and its one hundred passengers -- the loss of whom would have constituted a high death toll in a young colony -- are saved. The governor implies that this deliverance is not accidental. For the passengers on board the *James* aren't simply described as one hundred souls in danger. Instead, Winthrop specifies them here, calling the travelers "honest people of Yorkshire." Seventeenth-century Protestants understood natural disaster both as a way for "God to chastise and warn his people," and as "confirmation that they were indeed God's chosen people" (Grell

39). While the *James* might have been dashed against the rocks as warning to "repent and mend their ways before it was too late," instead the ship escaped with its upright cargo (Grell 39). The "honest people of Yorkshire" are wondrously spared, and this mercy confirms Puritan exceptionalism. In Winthrop's disaster narrative, surviving a hurricane is a matter of spiritual morality.²

Like Winthrop, Puritan minister Increase Mather also recorded the ship's dangerous passage during the 1635 hurricane, but with personal urgency. "I have peculiar reason to commemorate that solemn providence," Mather declared of the ship's survival, for his parents were onboard the *James* during the hurricane. He describes the ship caught in the tempest: "[The *James* was] at anchor amongst the rocks at the Isles of Shoals when the storm began; but their cables broke, and the ship was driving directly upon a mighty rock, so that all their lives were given up for lost; but then in an instant of time, God turned the wind about, which carried them from the rock of death before their eyes." Mather echoes Winthrop's attribution of the ship's salvation to providence. But while the salvation of the *James* is a story of refuge -- the passengers reach literal safe harbour -- there is also another instantiation of asylum at work here. The recovery of the vessel allows Mather's parents and their shipmates to reach the New World. A British ship which made frequent Atlantic crossings, the *James* carried Puritans to the New World as part of the Great Migration. And when it encountered the hurricane of 1635, the vessel was almost safely landed in Boston at the end of just such a journey, carrying religious asylum seekers, searching for what John Winthrop himself called "a shelter and

² Natural disasters were classically understood as acts of God. Indeed, this perspective endures in much contemporary disaster talk. But in the Enlightenment era, the dominance of this view of catastrophe as a vengeful deity's punishment began to wane. Natural disasters came to be seen as explicable phenomena resulting from rational, comprehensible scientific systems. Out of such reasoned discourse arose a new kind of faith: not in earthquakes as divine discipline for human failings, but instead in human supremacy over nature. Modernity itself came to be understood as a bulwark against nature, "an idealized technospere [which] is supposed to ensure the complete safety of its inhabitants" (Larabee 4). This faith in modernity's power to control nature is of course regularly subverted by the continual eruption of the very catastrophes it is supposed to prevent: "Each natural disaster challenges both the mastery [over nature] that was our goal and the political system that was put in place to serve such a purpose" (Huet 7). See Ted Steinberg's *Acts of God*, Huet's *The Culture of Disaster* and Rosenthal's *Mourning Modernism* for discussions of the shift from disaster as divine retribution to disaster as blind nature.

a hiding place" (Vowell 28). Thus the "honest people of Yorkshire" were delivered not only from the hurricane, but also into America's originary sanctuary.

John Winthrop's account of the 1635 hurricane doesn't only recount loss of life and narrow escapes. He also depicts refuge -- a safe harbour in the storm. In his most extended anecdote, the governor describes the salvation of Mr. Thatcher and his wife. When Mr. Allerton's boat is caught in the hurricane, they are the only survivors. Saved by virtue of being cast ashore out of the stormy ocean, along with the "necessities" of survival, the Thatchers remain on the unnamed shore until a ship happens upon them, and thus they are saved. Safe harbour is literalized here: Mr. and Mrs. Thatcher are saved by dry land and the escape it offers from the storm-tossed ocean. And as the sole survivors of Mr. Allerton's boat, they are exceptional. John Winthrop naturally attributes this preservation to "miraculous providence." The Thatchers' sanctuary, then, is not born of random chance, or their own efforts. Indeed, the survivors are granted no agency in Winthrop's disaster narrative. Throughout their ordeal they are depicted as entirely at the mercy of the storm, and of the divine. Refuge is not of their own making here, not born of desperate struggle against the waves to reach the safety of dry land. Instead, the Thatchers are simply "cast on shore," mere objects in the exercise of providential will. The governor does not struggle to define refuge here; for Winthrop, asylum is exclusively the province of the divine.

Although the 1635 hurricane was the first major natural disaster to afflict colonial America, it was far from the nation's last catastrophe. In the nearly four centuries since the Great Colonial Hurricane, flood and storm, fire and drought have regularly made their mark on the republic's landscape and literature. In these years Americans have continued to write disaster narratives, and to make those accounts tell the story of asylum. Refuge is inherently catastrophic, for asylum implies the storm: an external force of dispossession or violence which calls sanctuary into being. And in contemporary life, that storm is increasingly literal. As natural disasters become more and more frequent, they are understood as signal events of planetary catastrophe rather than as discrete aberrations from the norm. Novelist Zadie Smith's recent essay on climate change -- "Elegy for a Country's Seasons" -- laments the vanishing natural world: "Sing an elegy

for the washed away! For the cycles of life, for the saltwater marshes, the houses, the humans—whole islands of humans. Going, going, gone!" As Smith's elegy mourns that which is no more, it also recounts the mode of loss. In a flood which invokes the scriptural Great Deluge, everything in "Elegy for a Country's Seasons" is being "washed away." And even as natural disasters increase, and the planet becomes catastrophically vulnerable, so too has asylum become a definitive reality of modern life. "We are the time of refugees and fugitives," says historian Simon Schama. "In the 21st century, we are the era, par excellence, of the uprooted." In America, this flood of asylum seekers challenges the nation's historical self-definition as a singular place of refuge. For in the national imaginary, America is not one sanctuary among many, but asylum extant. Deeply invested in the romance of American exceptionalism, American refuge is the iconography of the republic itself. Close attention to narratives of natural disaster -- texts of the Dust Bowl, the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and Hurricane Katrina -- produces a nuanced theory of refuge which counters the myth of nationalized sanctuary. For in these texts, when wind and rain, flood and fire impose themselves on "nature's nation," sanctuary is literalized and urgent. In an era of normative catastrophe, these narratives of 'natural' disaster problematize the discourse of the nation-state as the exemplary guarantor of refuge. This resulting theory of asylum constitutes a vital prehistory for increasingly urgent current debates on vulnerable citizenship and environmental catastrophe.

We think we know the story of American asylum. Its iconography is among the most enduring in American culture. It emerges when Eliza frantically scrambles across the ice floes of the Ohio River in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, slave catchers and dogs at her back, struggling to reach the safety of the North. Or in *The Grapes of Wrath*, when the Joads flee the Oklahoma Dust Bowl in search of California's bounty. Both Eliza Harris and Tom Joad seek asylum: an inviolable space in which safety is assured. But American refuge is not merely one story in the pantheon of national myths, not simply another element of the national imaginary. And while this notion of America as originary sanctuary is a narrative that has endured into contemporary times, it is not a modern invention. Indeed, it's a story Americans have been telling since before they were Americans. The nation has always understood itself as a place of refuge. This impulse pre-dates the republic itself, for the nation's very origin story is a flight to sanctuary. The

Puritans – America’s ur-refugees – themselves understood the New World as a place of asylum. Before the *Arbella* set sail from England, before John Winthrop wrote about the hurricane of 1635, the future governor envisioned the New World as a sanctuary. Writing to his wife, Winthrop imagined the land he would soon deem a "city on a hill" as a place of refuge: "If the Lord sees it will be good for us, he will provide a shelter and a hiding place for us and others" (Vowell 28). In an echo of the scriptural language of Isaiah, Winthrop declares that the Puritans are in need of shelter and a "hiding place." Threat is implicit here, and refuge is defined as a zone of protection in which the Puritans can secret themselves. It is also of course explicitly religious, as the Puritans seek freedom from religious persecution as well as liberty to practice without heretical influences. And sanctuary not only shelters religious practice, but is also divinely assured. In the Puritan imagination, refuge was providential: it had been set aside for God's elect through divine intent. Thomas Hooker, a fellow Puritan and later the founder of Connecticut, shared Winthrop's visionary hope that the New World would be a place of sanctuary: "New England shall be a refuge for [God's] Noahs and his Lots, a rock and a shelter for his righteous one to run unto...[they] shall there be safe" (Vowell 29). Both Winthrop and Hooker write from Europe, the New World's refuge still sight unseen. Even in its earliest incarnations, then, American sanctuary was always imaginative. For Hooker and Winthrop, refuge was imagined before it was lived. From its beginnings, asylum has occupied these different registers. It is both a material reality -- the territory to which the Pilgrims sail -- and an imaginative construct -- the anticipatory "rock and a shelter."

Not restricted to religious refuge, this rhetoric of sanctuary is distinctly adaptive. In *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur described the new republic as a refuge not for religious freedom but for economic and political transformation. "In this great American asylum the poor of Europe have by some means met together," Crèvecoeur wrote. "Urged by a variety of motives, here they came...here they are become men...here they rank as citizens" (1016). In *Letters from an American Farmer*, sanctuary assures political subjectivity. And this process is explicitly nationalized; it is "American asylum" which shelters the "poor of Europe." The natives

of various countries come together in the New World in a newly created, collective identity. Several decades later, Ralph Waldo Emerson echoed this polyglot vision of American sanctuary. In an 1845 journal, Emerson called America “an asylum of all nations, the energy of Irish, Germans, Swedes, Poles, and Cossacks, and all the European tribes, -- of the Africans, and of the Polynesians, who will construct a new race, a new religion, a new State, a new literature.” The rhetoric of concealment -- of refuge as a place of hiding -- which dominates the Puritan view of asylum is notably absent here. For both Emerson and Crèvecoeur, asylum is not merely an inert space of escape, but a transformational zone. American refuge is a place of innovative translation, in which the Old World quite literally becomes the New Republic. It is not merely a space of divestment -- of shedding the oppressive past -- but also of accrual. As Emerson puts it, it is in the American "asylum of all nations" that a new race, culture, religion, literature and state are born. For both Emerson and the *American Farmer*, then, asylum is characterized by potentiality as much as by protection. And while this vision of refuge eagerly sheds past dispossession and poverty, it is not ahistorical. In a backward glance at the era of Winthrop and Hooker, Crèvecoeur recalls his English immigrant predecessors, "who, when convulsed by factions, afflicted by a variety of misery and wants, restless and impatient, took refuge here" (1014). Crèvecoeur crafts a familiar history of American asylum here. The enduring national narrative of the Puritans as America's ur-asylum seekers establishes the New World as a place with a heritage of refuge. The discourse of American refuge is in this sense teleological: it attributes the very existence of contemporary America to the nation's originary asylum.

Although Emerson and Crèvecoeur both represent the New World as a refuge for immigrants, this instantiation of American refuge is perhaps most famously embodied in Emma Lazarus's "The New Colossus" (1883). Written as a fundraising appeal for the Statue of Liberty's pedestal, the poem literally inscribes the nation as asylum. "The New Colossus" boldly declares America to be a place of refuge incarnate. In the poem, the "Mother of Exiles" offers "world-wide welcome" as she commands the Old World to keep their "storied pomp." Lady Liberty instead desires refugees: "Give me your tired, your poor,/ Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,/ The wretched refuse of your teeming shore./ Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,/ I lift my lamp beside the

golden door!" American asylum here constitutes a critique of Europe; the poem rejects gilded culture as the young republic throws open her arms to cultural detritus. In the new American arithmetic, the dispossessed are treasure, raw material for the making of a young nation. Lady Liberty's clear eyes see what Europe cannot, and "The New Colossus" explicitly summons "the homeless, the tempest-tost": the asylum seekers already suffering the storm of exile. This construction of sanctuary assumes what Charles Piot calls a "radical cultural alterity" (504). The place which the "tempest-tost" refugee seeks is necessarily and fundamentally different from the nation they flee. This notion of inherent distinction -- implicit in asylum claims -- is re-inscribed in Lazarus's poem. And in "The New Colossus" America is not just different but singular. For the poem asserts that the republic is the only place that will have the "wretched refuse." Articulating the narrative of exceptionalism, Lady Liberty's is the singular voice of welcome against the multiple "ancient lands" which discard the refugees like so much flotsam and jetsam. From the Puritans who fled religious persecution to the waves of nineteenth-century immigrants seeking a better life, American mythology asserts that it is the singular beacon, the ubiquitous cleft in the rock. In this way, Lazarus's poem articulates the narrative of nationalized refuge. Asylum is not simply one function of the nation. Instead, America itself is figured here as a "golden door." The republic is embodied as a gate, a symbol of extravagant welcome. In this influential and formative representation, then, America *is* asylum, for Lady Liberty personifies America entire. The poem and the statue in this sense constitute the opposite of the bureaucracy they represent. "The New Colossus" does not welcome newcomers to an immigration processing center, at which they may or may not be permitted entry to the nation. In this sense, the Statue of Liberty is the antithesis of Ellis Island. While Lady Liberty's -- and America's -- "world-wide welcome" represents unrestricted access, they also elide the myriad details of immigration. In Lazarus's vision, American refuge is all-encompassing. And its conflation of nation and refuge, and refuge and liberty, is one of the founding myths of the republic.³

³ Of course America is not the world's only safe harbour; Lazarus's poem constitutes not a policy paper on refuge but an American iconography of asylum. Sanctuary is in fact an ancient tradition, and one of the earliest incarnations is the practice of religious sanctuary, in which a religious building -- mosque, church

Like the Pilgrims and immigrants, the slave is an iconic American asylum seeker.⁴ Many slave narratives depict the journey to refuge, and abolitionist rhetoric commonly represented the North as a place of asylum. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), is prefaced by a letter from abolitionist Wendell Phillips which deploys this discourse of refuge. A conventional framing device by which a white speaker legitimates a black slave narrative, Phillips's letter indicates the adaptive plasticity of American asylum rhetoric. Writing to Douglass, Phillips celebrates the efforts of his fellow abolitionists who, in contravention of the Constitution, “are determined that they will ‘hide the outcast,’ and that their hearths shall be, in spite of the law, an asylum for the oppressed” (45). Refuge is figured here as both flagrantly illegal and unquestionably moral. Sanctuary is also extra-judicial, for asylum in antebellum America is assured “in spite of the law.” Unlike Winthrop and Crèvecoeur, Phillips's vision of asylum constitutes a shelter not from religious persecution or political inequality, but from the law itself. The home – represented here through synecdoche as the “hearth” – comprises refuge for an American slave. When the public sphere violates sanctuary, the private realm will provide shelter. But only a few lines later, Phillips complicates this opposition of juridical persecution and domestic asylum. He urges Douglass and his fellow former slaves to continue their abolitionist efforts until asylum is not private retreat but national institution:

New England, cutting loose from a blood-stained Union, shall glory in being the house of refuge for the oppressed; -- till we no longer merely ‘hide the

or synagogue -- harbours someone at risk of deportation or violence. R. J. Macrides' “Killing, Asylum, and the Law in Byzantium” reviews the history of Christian sanctuary, noting, “The church’s right to grant asylum or refuge to all orthodox Christians fleeing from the threat of imprisonment or physical harm seems to have been established by custom. Civil legislation from the fourth century on acknowledged and regulated it, with severe sanctions against the transgressors of the rights of refugees introduced in the fifth century” (510). This practice of sanctuary is not obsolete; there are currently illegal immigrants taking refuge in religious buildings all over America. Grace Yukich's *One Family Under God: Immigration Politics and Progressive Religion in America* (2013) examines this phenomenon. But like political asylum, this New Sanctuary Movement remains an essentially exceptional practice -- one which shelters a few people but does not constitute refuge on an extensive scale.

⁴ Yet the bondswoman is both a characteristic and exceptional refugee. By 1807, the international slave trade had been abolished in the United States and most American slaves were ‘country-born’ -- and therefore natives of the republic which enslaved them. As natality did not endow full citizenship, fugitive slaves functioned as a kind of immigrant within their own land, seeking refuge in the North.

outcast,' ...but, consecrating anew the soil of the Pilgrims as an asylum for the oppressed, proclaim our *welcome* to the slave so loudly, that the tones shall reach every hut in the Carolinas, and make the broken-hearted bondman leap up at the thought of old Massachusetts. (46)

As in *Letters from an American Farmer*, refuge here is explicitly inherited from the Puritans. These proto-Americans function as fathers not only of the nation, but also as progenitors of the republic as “an asylum for the oppressed.” In an echo of Crèvecoeur's genealogy of American refuge, this narrative gesture establishes both the Puritans as ur-asylum seekers, and the nation as originary asylum.⁵ Yet despite this emphasis on history, for Phillips the Pilgrims' sanctuary is not the relic of a bygone era. He does not excavate the nation's past here, but describes its present. This living history re-defines abolitionists not as lawbreaking radicals but the as righteous inheritors of America's first citizens. Abolitionism is "consecrating anew the soil of the Pilgrims."

In Phillips' letter to Douglass, asylum is almost entirely a matter of territory. Refuge is defined as escape from the Carolinas to Massachusetts. And this model is not unique to Wendell Phillips, for in the American imaginary, asylum is geographical. The Pilgrims sail to the New World, slaves escape from a “hut in the Carolinas” to “old Massachusetts,” immigrants stream off boats and onto Ellis Island, and the Joads flee Oklahoma for California. Thus sanctuary in the American imaginary is literalized. It is represented as a place, that place is the republic itself. America is the definitive end of the journey, the much-desired destination, for which the asylum seeker travels hard, sailing across the Atlantic or fleeing across the Ohio River. Near the end of his *Narrative*, Douglass recounts his arrival in New York after escaping from Maryland. In the town of New Bedford, he is surprised to see many prosperous African-Americans, “a great many of whom, like myself, had escaped thither as a refuge from the hunters of men” (149). For Douglass, New York is the asylum to which he fled from below the Mason-Dixon line. This model of sanctuary is based on political asylum, in which the refugee is, as Ranjana Khanna puts it, "exiled from one site" and seeking rights in another

⁵ This account of America's originary founding as sanctuary of course elides the Virginia colonies, which were settled before both Plymouth and the Massachusetts Bay colonies and which were intended as profit-seeking ventures and not as sanctuary for asylum-seekers.

(373). This form of asylum has a long and storied history. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt sketches the "long and sacred history of asylum," singling out refuge as "the only right that had ever figured as a symbol of the Rights of Man in the sphere of international relations" (280). For in the nation-state, citizenship is nationalized, and asylum is the act of escaping one nation and finding shelter in another.⁶ As Jacques Derrida puts it, asylum shelters "the foreigner in general, the immigrant, the exiled, the stateless or the displaced person" (4). Like the Puritans, immigrants and slaves, the asylum seeker is conventionally understood as a political or religious dissident who achieves sanctuary by escaping the locale of oppression.

Both political and literary visions of asylum as geographical displacement privilege the journey. The voyage to refuge functions as the mode by which sanctuary is earned; and the trials of crossing the Ohio River or the Atlantic Ocean is the necessary path to citizenship. For in the American imaginary, asylum assures not just shelter, but citizenship. The journey to refuge is a narrative of nation-building, and recounts the mode by which one becomes a citizen who is not homeland-born. It is the trial through which slaves and immigrants pass in order to become Americans. In this sense, refuge is co-incident with Americanness. While the Puritan story continued long beyond the landing at Plymouth Rock, the colonists were never again refugees, but citizens. In the American imaginary, Winthrop, Hooker and their shipmates came to find sanctuary, and lived the rest of their lives in the "shelter" they sought and found. Slave narratives also reflect this pattern, for the North is conflated with freedom. This textual conclusion prompts a theoretical one: that refuge not only ends the story, but endures forever. It is the happily ever after of American literature. Once achieved, it is imagined to be permanent.

⁶ This practice and promise of asylum was catastrophically violated in twentieth-century Europe. In totalitarian Europe, as Arendt argues, the Rights of Man were trumped by the rights of the state. As nation-states began to denationalize their citizens, their right to do so went largely unchallenged, and no other nation made citizens of the newly stateless masses. The sheer numbers of the dispossessed no doubt contributed to this failure. The failure of asylum in totalitarian Europe was also hastened by the fact that the refugees did not meet the traditional definition of the asylum seeker as political or religious dissident. As Arendt observes, "the new refugees were not persecuted because of what they had done or thought, but because of what they unchangeably were – born into the wrong kind of race or the wrong kind of class" (294).

But asylum does not always function in this archetypical way. The imaginary of refuge, with its genealogy of Puritans, slaves and immigrants, is not refuge entire, but an idealized and partial history of American asylum. Geography does not always constitute sanctuary. Displacement does not necessarily secure refuge. This easy equation of American territory with asylum is particularly vexed when America is not the refugees' destination but instead their point of origin. These asylum seekers aren't Pilgrims and immigrants, but always already Americans. This alternate vision of refuge is evident in Linda Brent's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Brent describes the experience of arriving in New York and finding there no secure cleft in the rock, no "house of refuge for the oppressed," as abolitionist Wendell Phillips would have it. Instead, the federal Fugitive Slave Act renders Jacobs' asylum vulnerably provisional: "Oppressed Poles and Hungarians could find a refuge in that city...but there I sat, an oppressed American, not daring to show my face" (224). Brent denounces the conflation of American territory and asylum here. Upon arrival in the North, this model is revealed as bitterly inadequate. The narrative of asylum as extravagant welcome to the dispossessed is problematized when refugees do not sail across an ocean in search of sanctuary. Similarly, in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, Dust Bowl refugees stream west to California. Starving and willing to work, bewildered at their dispossession, they object to it: "We ain't foreign. Seven generations back Americans...One of our folks was in the Revolution, an' they was lots of our folks in the Civil War -- both sides. Americans" (317-18). The Dust Bowl refugees here speak the language of Winthrop and Crèvecoeur, Phillips and Lazarus. They call upon the national narrative of asylum, and view their Americanness as protective. Citizenship is invoked here as a bulwark against dispossession. The migrant workers resist the revelation that they cannot be both an Okie and an American. Or, more precisely, that an Okie is not a citizen. Seventy years after the Dust Bowl, another American in another natural disaster echoes the disbelief expressed by the Okies and Linda Brent. In Spike Lee's documentary *When the Levees Broke* (2006), Graham B. Banks, a New Orleans resident and Director of Security at the Superdome Hyatt Hotel, rejects the depiction of Hurricane Katrina evacuees as refugees: "Damn, when the storm came in that blew away our citizenship, too? What, we forgot, we wasn't American citizens anymore?...Refugees. I thought that was folks that didn't

have a country, man, that didn't have anywhere." Asylum is contingent on nationality here. What does it mean to be an American citizen when the nation can so easily slip the bonds of obligation? For many New Orleanians, Hurricane Katrina destroyed the belief that citizenship was inherent and permanent. In "Hell No We Ain't All Right!" rap artists Public Enemy echoed Graham B. Banks: "Now I see we be the new faces of refugees, who ain't even overseas/ But stuck here on our knees...New world's upside down and OUT of order." In both Hurricane Katrina and the Dust Bowl, America un-does its people's Americanness, even as it keeps these ex-citizens under its authority. While these former subjects remain under the power of the nation, they no longer bear any rights as citizens. Following on the work of Derrida and Arendt, scholars have considered the problem of a sovereign who renders its citizens rightless and stateless, but does not exile them. Such a figure is not an asylee, for, still subject to the disciplinary power of her homeland, she cannot appeal for refuge in other nations. Disenfranchised by the very nations which still hold them in its grasp, these nightmare subjects are detained in Guantanamo Bay and died in the streets of New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina. Other vulnerable citizens include so-called 'illegal' Americans, and those subject to rendition, in which terrorist suspects are captured and transferred to nations where torture is legal. Prisons such as Guantanamo Bay -- an extra-national site which exists precisely so that the American government can subvert American law -- also engage in the same subversion of citizenship.

Giorgio Agamben calls this phenomenon the state of exception, which he defines as "not a special kind of law (like the law of war); rather...it is a suspension of the juridical order itself" (5). Agamben notes that this suspension of law is characterized by two developments: "the extension of the military authority's wartime powers into the civil sphere, and...a suspension of the constitution (or of those constitutional norms that protect individual liberties)...[T]he two models end up merging into a single juridical phenomenon that we call the *state of exception*"(5). Dave Eggers' Hurricane Katrina narrative *Zeitoun* (2009) depicts this state of emergency in action. In the days following the storm, Syrian-American Abdulrahman Zeitoun is arrested on his own property, and taken to a makeshift prison. He is not charged with a crime, not permitted to make a phone call or consult legal counsel. Imprisoned in an outdoor cell made of chain link

fencing, and denied medical care for an open wound, Zeitoun is never formally charged, although several guards inform him that he is "Taliban" or "Al-Quaeda." After three weeks Zeitoun is finally released from prison, and all charges are dropped. In *Zeitoun*, the "state of exception" exercises unchecked power against its citizens, who have been stripped of constitutional rights, and citizens have been converted into intra-national refugees.

Contemporary thinking about vulnerable citizenship tends to assume rather than investigate asylum. While both Arendt and Derrida focus specifically on the issue of political refuge, in more recent scholarship this emphasis falls away -- partly due to the shift from immigrants to un-citizens. Although the promise of citizenship is often articulated in terms of refuge -- that is, the nation-state is assessed by its success or failure in providing sanctuary -- asylum itself remains under-theorized in these arguments. In "World History According to Katrina," Wai Chee Dimock follows, implicitly, on the assertions of Agamben's *State of Exception* and accepts Agamben's claim that in the modern, democratic nation-state, the citizen has been stripped of protection. However, her focus is an interrogation of the notion of the nation-state as a teleological category.⁷ Dimock asserts that Katrina constitutes the failure not merely of one of the nation-state's key functions, but instead of its single constitutive purpose: "Nationality...ought to be synonymous with a guaranteed safety, an insulation from any harm that arises. It ought to be our bulwark against the storm" (144). In Hurricane Katrina, this definitive function of America fails. This is precisely the claim that Graham Banks makes in *When the Levees Broke*. When he vigorously resists de-nationalizing Katrina victims by calling them refugees, Banks asserts that the nation "ought to be our bulwark against the storm." Nationality is the guarantor of refuge here, and it is this status that Spike Lee's interviewee is unwilling to cede. The solution, Dimock suggests, is not to make the sovereign nation more sovereign, but to question the orthodoxy of nationalism.⁸ In doing

⁷ Anna Hartnell makes a similar claim; she suggests that Spike Lee's film also gestures beyond national identity as the guarantor of refuge. *When the Levees Broke*, she argues, asserts that the international context of human rights is the preferable basis for asylum claims. Citizenship, Hartnell argues, transcends homeland in Lee's documentary.

⁸ Having established that the fundamental function of the state is to provide asylum, Dimock asserts that America's failure to do so in Katrina bankrupts the very category of national sovereignty. The failure of

so, she echoes Derrida's call for citizens to "reorient the politics of the state [and] transform and reform the modalities of membership" (4).

Notably, in Dimock's formulation asylum is precisely the protection to which citizens are guaranteed and to which refugees have no claim. But "World History According to Katrina" is primarily interested in the limits of the nation-state rather than in refuge. I want to return to the moment in Dimock's argument, when, in reviewing the field, she asserts that "[n]ationality...ought to be synonymous with a guaranteed safety, an insulation from any harm that arises. It ought to be our bulwark against the storm" (144). While refuge facilitates this incisive discussion of national sovereignty, it is not the focus of the argument. Instead, asylum is instrumentalized here, for while "bulwark against the storm" is an evocative phrase, it intimates rather than analyses sanctuary. Asylum often functions in just this way; it is the hinge -- the assumption -- upon which other arguments are predicated. This project dwells in that hinge. It considers not what asylum facilitates, but the nature of refuge itself. It challenges the assumption that we know what asylum is and how it functions, the story it's telling and what that story means. Reading narratives of American natural disasters, this project advances a theory of refuge -- of that "bulwark against the storm." In doing so, it theorizes the concept that has so often been instrumentalized in the service of other critical work. In this project I argue that the nature of asylum is itself consequential, and that sustained attention to both the dream and practice of refuge will reveal a trenchant critique of American individualism.

What then is asylum? Following Agamben, this project engages with the concept of the exceptional space. Indeed, segregation from the external world is asylum's definitive characteristic, the *sine qua non* of refuge. Asylum is quite literally excepted -- that is, apart from -- the world which surrounds it. Without this differentiation, refuge is

the nation to protect its citizens is thus not merely a breach of the levee wall: "The breach is in...the integrity of the United States as a nation, its ability to *be* sovereign" (144). This catastrophic rupture in national sovereignty puts into question America's very purpose: if it does not protect, if there is no sanctuary, Dimock asserts, then the nation has no reason to exist.⁸ She questions historiography's reification of the nation-state as essential and definitive. Dimock seeks an alternate way of thinking about history -- and of defining the disciplines of American Studies and American literature. She rejects the "foregone conclusion that the form of the nation is the only form that matters," either in scholarly work or in wider conceptions (145).

meaningless. However, sanctuary as defined in this project functions as a *zone* of exception rather than a *state* of exception. Unlike the state of exception, refuge is not explicitly juridical, but is Agambenian in its notion of an exceptional domain. And that domain is surprisingly under-determined. In its instantiation as geographical displacement, asylum is primarily defined in opposition to what the refugee flees. It is definitively different from the place left behind: Crèvecoeur celebrates escape from peonage and aristocratic privilege, while the Puritans envision religious freedom. Abolitionists imagine a land where African-Americans are liberated from the bonds of slavery. Thus asylum is conventionally defined by what it excludes, whether religious persecution, political tyranny, or racial injustice. Rarely conceptualized beyond this oppositional structure, asylum is the iconographic good place. It is, as Charles Piot suggests, where the refugee seeks shelter from "barbaric customs/irrational sentiments/racist prejudice/totalitarian politics/religious fanaticism" (504). John Winthrop and Thomas Hooker both engage in this evocative yet indistinct discourse of sanctuary. The Puritan fathers describe the New World as a "shelter" and a "hiding place"; Hooker hopes of New England that the Puritans "shall there be safe." For Wendell Phillips, Massachusetts embodies refuge precisely because it is not the Carolinas. While this rhetoric is evocative, it is also nebulous. Refuge is differentiated from its antithesis, but not itself defined. Beyond its role as safe haven -- as the space which definitively excludes peril -- it is rarely further explicated. Sanctuary is in this sense under-determined. The precise nature of the space at the heart of this national -- and nationalizing -- narrative remains elusive, and thus sustained attention to the nature of refuge in narratives of natural disaster is illuminating.

This is not to assert the existence of an 'asylum narrative.' Refuge is not a discrete literary form, but a central narrative which runs throughout virtually every genre of American literature. However, the textual archive for this thesis does cohere into a genre. These disaster narratives depict catastrophic experience or its aftermath. Thomas Hooker's previously mentioned vision of asylum as a Puritan safe haven combines these elements: "New England shall be a refuge for [God's] Noahs and his Lots, a rock and a shelter for his righteous one to run unto...[they] shall there be safe" (Vowell 29). Hooker

connects refuge and disaster here. By invoking the scriptural model of Noah, he depicts the Puritans not just as refugees, but as flood refugees. The New World functions as the ark, and the Pilgrims are by implication the chosen few, spared by Yahweh from the deluge which drowns every other living thing. In Hooker's account, as in other narratives of natural disaster, shelter from the storm is both literal and metaphorical. It is ideological, but also pressingly material. As in Thomas Hooker's journal entry, all of the disaster narratives under consideration here are both factual and natural. These are calamities wrought primarily by forces of nature, such as flood, drought, storm and earthquake, and not catastrophes such as war, epidemic disease, acts of terrorism, and technological collapse. Thus the 2011 Fukushima Daichii nuclear plant failure, September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and the 1986 space shuttle Challenger explosion, while disastrous, are not part of this archive. Similarly, this project is focused on narratives of historical catastrophe. While works of fiction are included, the disasters these texts depict are historical, and not themselves fictional. Thus although John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* -- which will be discussed in chapter one -- is a novel, it depicts the Dust Bowl of the 1920s and '30s and not a speculative catastrophe. Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985), then -- a novel which is often read as a definitive postmodern disaster text -- is doubly excluded from this project as its "airborne toxic event" is both a fictional catastrophe and not a natural disaster.⁹ In contrast, this project is focused on accounts of historical, natural disasters: on moments when forces of geology and meteorology, when ocean and earth and wind impose on America. This distinction between technological and natural catastrophes constitutes a divergence from much contemporary disaster scholarship. In disaster studies, calamity is often broadly conceived. As Kevin Rozario notes, "sudden catastrophes [such as] (nuclear hazards, terrorist attacks)...share many properties with natural disasters" (2). Catastrophe functions as a capacious category, and scholars often read, for instance, the Challenger explosion, Hurricane Katrina and the attacks of September 11 as analogous disasters.¹⁰

⁹ *White Noise* is a touchstone in disaster scholarship. Many critics highlight the technological nature of the catastrophe and the novel's interest in the spectacle of disaster; these elements make the text representative of post-modern apocalyptic calamity literature.

¹⁰ Ann Larabee's *Decade of Disaster* exemplifies this approach. Larabee examines disparate but chronologically proximate catastrophes -- the 1980s are the titular 'decade of disaster' -- through the lens of

This project's methodology instead focalizes American asylum through narratives of natural disaster. This precise archive selection allows for an expansive definition of asylum, grounded in the narrative specificity of the particular literary genre of disaster narratives. As we shall see, natural disasters also facilitate a discussion of the American landscape which technological catastrophe does not.

An investigation of these particular disaster narratives is timely. Even in the years since Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, America has endured Hurricane Sandy, a Mississippi River valley flood, California wildfires, ongoing western drought and devastating tornadoes in the Midwest, most disastrously in Joplin, Missouri. As the nation -- and indeed the world -- is increasingly plagued by natural disaster, a close examination of the literary representation of such catastrophes is revealing. As natural disasters afflict America, disaster talk turns to earlier catastrophes. A February 2014 op-ed in the *New York Times*, ominously titled "The Dust Bowl Returns," lamented the ongoing drought in California, and noted that "some farms in the western Valley...now resemble the dust bowl that drove so many Tom Joads here in the 1930s" (Roberts and Kytlye). This invocation of an analagous historical catastrophe suggests an attempt to find exemplars, and also reveals the extent to which disaster narratives are in conversation with each other: "The experience of a disastrous incident and its representation in word and image are mutually informing. It is not prior personal experience but myths -- or, less grandiloquently, texts that have a wide and pervasive cultural influence -- that account for what most of us think we know about disasters" (Stock and Stott 10). This discursive exchange between narratives of natural disaster is also evident in the recurrence of the Great Mississippi Flood in contemporary disaster talk. The 1927 deluge remains the benchmark against which all catastrophic flooding in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta is measured. During the flood of spring 2011, news reports compared the current deluge to the record-breaking flood of 1927: "A surge of water not seen since the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 is forecast in coming days to test the enormous levees lining the Mississippi River on its course through the Deep South....Experts [project] the river to

technological relations. This methodology is focalized through historical epoch rather than catastrophic mode. Similarly, Stock and Stott's collection *Representing the Unimaginable: Narratives of Disaster* contains essays on early modern earthquakes, the Holocaust and the shell-shock poetry of the First World War.

run several feet above the height it reached in... 1927, when the river broke its banks, flooded 27,000 square miles, killed hundreds and displaced thousands” (“Mississippi”). Similarly, the *LA Times* noted that water levels in historic Vicksburg, Mississippi surpassed the record heights set in April 1927, and many other news outlets reminded Americans that major spillways only exist because of the flood management policies developed following the 1927 deluge. Given these discursive echoes, this is a timely moment to consider representation of the American natural disasters which continue to shape contemporary interpretations of eco-catastrophe.

Of course, any conversation about flood, drought and hurricane raises the question: what's so natural about natural disaster? In recent years, scholars have problematized the notion of 'natural' disaster.¹¹ Social vulnerability scholarship in particular investigates the relationship between catastrophe and social-economic conditions. As environmental historian Ted Steinberg notes, the belief that natural disasters are natural occurrences, that flood, fire and storm are beyond human control puts “the emphasis on chaotic nature as the culprit – to the exclusion of human economic forces” (*Acts* xxii). Steinberg and others assert that natural disasters are not “primarily accidents,” and focus instead on the “historically contingent nature of these phenomena and the question of human complicity” (xx). Following Steinberg, then, it's clear that it wasn't just record-breaking rainfall that made the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 so exceptionally disastrous. Riverbank logging, followed by farming on the newly de-timbered land, stripped the Mississippi's shores of the means to absorb rainwater. Lacking spongy topsoil and tree roots, “for the first time in centuries the tributaries of the Mississippi all filled and began pouring their loads into the main channel simultaneously” (Daniels 5). Levee policy only worsened the 1927 deluge. From the earliest days of European settlement, earthen walls were constructed to protect individual sections of the

¹¹ Social vulnerability scholarship also resists the definition of natural disaster as a discrete and violent variation from the norm. Rather than viewing catastrophe as a temporary deviation from a normative state of non-disaster, social vulnerability scholarship emphasizes the ‘permanent disaster’ of daily life for many disenfranchised people. Hurricane Katrina, for example, thus represents a difference in degree of dispossession rather than in kind. This approach emphasizes ongoing oppression by race, gender and class, and argues that natural disasters are not an exceptional threat to marginalized populations, but are simply the moment of perpetual danger’s greatest visibility. Other significant scholarship on social vulnerability includes “Taking the Naturalness out of Natural Disasters” by O’Keefe, Westgate et al and Kevin Hewitt’s *Regions of Risk: A Geographical Introduction to Disasters* (1997).

riverbanks. Until the Mississippi River Commission was established in 1879 to centralize flood control efforts, communities simply built higher and stronger levees than the towns across river, hoping that when the waters rose, their own bulwark would hold at the expense of their neighbours. The proliferation of levees, however, caused the engorged Mississippi to become even more dangerous: “Constraining all the water to the river’s main channel concentrated all its force into one avenue, increasing the danger of a break...being hammered through one of the retaining walls” (Briggs 26). Human impact thus cannot be discounted in discussions of natural disaster. Despite these qualifications, however, the distinction between natural and non-natural disaster remains a useful one. For the delineation is based not on causation, but on kind. While the destruction of the Gulf Coast wetlands clearly exacerbated the effects of Hurricane Katrina, like all deluges the resulting flood was an ecological phenomenon. It was, quite simply, made of water. A focus on natural disaster need not necessarily, then, *naturalize* disaster. But the textual archive assembled here does depict disasters which are ecological, and even elemental: in which wind, water and earth are the mode of human catastrophe. This focus on natural disaster rather than technological catastrophe is consequential, for it highlights the American landscape. In these texts, cataclysm is manifested in nature itself. For narratives of natural disaster depict, in Perry Miller’s phrase, nature’s betrayal of “nature’s nation.” This catastrophic locus intensifies the intra-national nature of these texts: both the refugees and the disaster they flee are homegrown. These disaster narratives, then, recount how “this land” of Woody Guthrie’s anthemic song “This Land is Your Land” -- a text under discussion in chapter one -- makes refugees of American citizens. The iconic American landscapes of the Mississippi River and the Great Plains are made perilous here. No longer an index of exceptionality, this territory now manifests vulnerability -- that which cannot be controlled. In these texts, asylum constitutes refuge from a variety of threats, none more so than nature itself. This depiction of ravaging nature complicates the notion of the pastoral as consolatory refuge. As Lawrence Buell notes, “pastoral ideology” represents “the essential America as exurban, green, pastoral, even wild” (32-3). This landscape is conventionally understood as a retreat to “a less urbanized, more ‘natural’ state of existence” (Buell 31). In natural disaster, however, this depiction of nature as sanctuary falters. As both the metaphorical and literal topography of America

shifts, the national landscape is once again re-made, but as a hazard-scape rather than a garden of solace.

William Bradford and John Winthrop's hurricane diaries are far from the only accounts of American natural disaster. As Steven Biel notes, "Disasters have been, and continue to be, occasions for extraordinary cultural production" (3). While some disaster narratives are well known -- most notably disaster films -- literary accounts of catastrophe are often unremembered or unrecognized as catastrophe narratives. *The Wizard of Oz* (1900), for instance, opens with a tornado -- the first chapter is simply called 'The Cyclone.' Spotting an ominous Kansas sky, Dorothy's Auntie Em urges her niece to flee to sanctuary: "One glance told her of the danger close at hand. 'Quick, Dorothy,' she screamed; 'run for the cellar!'" (8). Dorothy of course does not reach the cellar in time, and as she huddles in the house, the tornado rushing around her, the building is lifted up by the storm and carried away to Oz. Natural disaster, then is the mode of access to a magical world. Dorothy rides the cyclone out of Kansas and into Oz. In a moment of doubled signification, the cyclone is both the peril which makes refuge necessary and the mode of geographical displacement which conveys Dorothy to sanctuary. And *Oz* is not the only Baum book in which natural disaster plays such a transportive role. In *Dorothy and the Wizard in Oz* (1908), published only two years after the San Francisco earthquake, Dorothy has recently visited the city by the bay. Soon after, and while Dorothy is still in California, another quake strikes. Swallowed up by the earth, the young girl again emerges in an enchanted land. In both Baum texts, then, magical worlds function as sanctuary: shelter which saves Dorothy from the quite literal storm. In Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), the climactic event takes place during the 1928 Okeechobee hurricane. In an eerie presage of Hurricane Katrina, it is not the storm alone which endangers residents. The 1937 hurricane breaches a dike, causing a catastrophic flood. It is the hurricane itself which gives the novel its defining image. Florida Everglades residents attempting to ride out the storm gaze at the horizon as the hurricane approaches: "They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God." James Agee and Walker Evans' *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) is recognizable as a disaster narrative. The pairing of text and image in Agee and Evans' work vividly portrays the ravages of the Dust Bowl. In *God's Trombones: Seven Negro*

Sermons in Verse (1927), James Weldon Johnson re-tells an ur-disaster narrative in the poem 'Noah Built the Ark.' Indeed, the Noah's Ark story was particularly influential in African-American sermons. As one of the formative disaster narratives, it is re-told again and again, in texts such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's -- the "most widely popular poet of his day" -- "The Wreck of the Hesperus" (1840), a ballad of "perennial popularity" which depicts a sailor and his daughter at sea during a deadly hurricane (Hollahan 40, 45). *A Night to Remember* (1955), Walter Lord's re-telling of the sinking of the RMS Titanic, was a smash hit. Made into a film three years later, the book piqued public interest in the 1912 disaster.¹²

But every text which depicts disaster is not a disaster narrative. There is, for instance, a tempest in *Moby Dick*, which Melville describes as "the direst of all storms, the Typhoon. It will sometimes burst from out that cloudless sky, like an exploding bomb upon a dazed and sleepy town" (611). But the novel is not primarily an account of natural catastrophe. It does not narrate the experience of disaster, and the typhoon is not the determinative element in *Moby Dick*. Floods, fires and storms may serve thus as plot points, as consequential events in texts which are not themselves disaster narratives. These catastrophes serve other purposes: they propel the narrative forward and lend dramatic tension to a text. Natural disasters may also serve as anthropomorphic literary devices, such as in Kate Chopin's "The Storm" (1898), in which the incoming storm is granted agency: "certain somber clouds...were rolling with sinister intention from the west, accompanied by a sullen, threatening roar" (1). In Chopin's short story, the Louisiana cyclone serves as both backdrop and metaphor for a sexual encounter. The passion of the storm echoes the passion of the adulterous lovers, who at last consummate their long-deferred love affair while seeking shelter from a passing hurricane. Similarly, William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* depicts how a flood delays the Bundrens' attempts to reach Jefferson and bury Addie. In these texts, disaster is not constitutive.

Although there are many literary disaster narratives, much popular literature has also been inspired by disaster. The 1889 Johnstown Flood, the Great Chicago Fire of

¹² Steven Biel's *Down with the Old Canoe: A Cultural History of the Titanic Disaster* (1996) ably recounts and analyses the depiction of the 1912 catastrophe in American cultural and social history.

1871 and the 1906 San Francisco earthquake all generated scores of disaster narratives. In his account of Chicago's catastrophic history, Carl Smith notes the "staggering volume" and "daunting quantity" of texts inspired by the conflagration (25). The San Francisco earthquake similarly inspired "massive national and international coverage -- nearly a hundred popular books were published in 1906 alone" (Steinberg 103). These texts of these disasters are varied. Typical of Chicago Fire literature, for instance, are dime novels such as *The Ruined City; or, The Horrors of Chicago* (1871). The text's subtitle perhaps best indicates its genre: "A Full Description of the Great Fire of Chicago, Including the No. of Houses, and Principal Buildings Burnt, Number of lives Lost; Thrilling Incidents, Amount of Damage Done" (Smith 25). In addition to pulp fiction, the fire also resulted in extensive newspaper coverage, personal accounts, stage plays, sermons, and fire histories, many of which were popular enough to be published in "multiple editions" (Smith 24). Among the many poems inspired by the disaster was John Greenleaf Whittier's 'Chicago,' in which he memorably refers to the catastrophe as a "fiery hurricane," using the metaphor of one natural disaster to describe another. Newspaper and magazines regularly covered natural disasters, and were often the first depiction of the latest catastrophe to reach American homes.¹³ There were also many songs published about natural disasters, including the Chicago Fire tune "Pity the Homeless, or Burnt Out," a waltz which appealed to the unafflicted for charity: "Pity the homeless, pity the poor,/ By the fierce Fire fiend forced to your door" (Murray).¹⁴ The Johnstown Flood inspired similar cultural production, and scores of "sentimental popular songs [especially] 'Pathetic Refrains' and 'Rousing Marches'" were published immediately after the disaster. "My Last Message," by J. P. Skelly, was inspired by the real-life heroics of telegraph operator Hettie Ogle. Renamed 'Minnie' in the song, Ogle died while telegraphing communities downriver to warn them of the coming flood.

¹³ Sheila Hones explores the representation of disaster in magazines during America's Gilded Age in "Distant Disaster, Local Fears: Volcanoes, Earthquakes, Revolution, and Passion in *The Atlantic Monthly*, 1880-84."

¹⁴ The Chicago History Museum hosts a remarkable website on the Great Fire, including eyewitness accounts, newspaper coverage, stage plays, novels, songs, paintings, lithographs and even images of souvenirs.

Many of these texts of formative American disasters are unremembered. The literature of these catastrophes, immensely popular in their day, has not much endured in either the public or scholarly imagination. Even disaster narratives written by authors familiar to contemporary readers are largely forgotten. H.G. Wells, William James and Jack London all wrote about the San Francisco earthquake, and Walt Whitman was commissioned to write a poem commemorating the Johnstown Flood. He published "A Voice from Death" in *New York World* only one week after the 1889 disaster. Yet these are far from the most renowned or even recognized texts by Whitman, London, James and Wells. Similarly, Richard Wright's flood stories are among the least commented upon in his canon. It is only in the twentieth century that disaster narratives begin to transcend this ephemerality and endure in cultural memory. Even then, the remembered texts are often representative: *The Grapes of Wrath* and Dorothea Lange's photograph 'Migrant Mother' are the only truly well-known texts of the Dust Bowl. Clearly, the disaster narrative is a historically contingent genre. As we have seen, the texts of the Great Mississippi Flood experienced a cultural re-birth after Katrina, as artistic analogues for the catastrophe were sought. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Randy Newman's 'Louisiana 1927' (1974) -- a song about the Great Mississippi Flood -- became Louisiana's "unofficial anthem" (Himes). Both Newman and Aaron Neville performed the song at benefit concerts and on fundraising albums, and the tune was memorably sung by John Boutté at the 2006 New Orleans JazzFest, with altered lyrics reflecting the recent disaster. This return to the texts of earlier disasters implies a discursive relationship among accounts of American natural catastrophes. And the ephemerality of this archive does not elide the persistent American investment in disaster narratives. In the catastrophic moment, disaster narratives do something important. This genre is not merely descriptive; disaster narratives do not simply reproduce calamitous events by holding a mirror up to ravaged nature. Rather, the genre narrativizes: it makes a story out of cataclysm. Using the conventional shaping devices of literature, the disaster narrative identifies a protagonist-survivor, a savior and victims. And these narrative choices shape the text's and the disaster's meaning. Simply by choosing a catastrophe, the genre also implicitly defines what constitutes 'disaster.' John Steinbeck, for example, expands cataclysm beyond the Dust Bowl to the wider catastrophe of sharecropping and economic

dispossession. *The Grapes of Wrath* thus narrates a catastrophe in which drought is only one element, extending the notion of disaster far beyond the ‘natural.’ These choices are consequential, for Steinbeck’s definition indicts humanity and not just disembodied nature as perpetrators of the Dust Bowl.

Indeed, who *does* the rescuing in a disaster narrative often determines who *needs* rescuing. Will Percy’s memoir *Lanterns on the Levee* recounts flood relief efforts in Greenville, Mississippi – one of the communities worst hit by the 1927 deluge. Percy’s racialized account of the disaster casts African-Americans as definitive victims, utterly unable to act on their own behalf: “Of course...the Negroes had no capacity to plan for their own welfare; planning for them was another of our burdens” (258). Percy does more than simply identify African-Americans as the victims of the Great Mississippi Flood here. In this passage, the text also constructs African-Americans as representative casualties – as exemplary victims. Other disaster narratives construct racialized victimhood differently. In Reverend Griggs’s 1927 sermon ‘Saving the Day,’ which narrates the same disaster as Hoover’s and Percy’s memoirs, the hero-saviours are neither white planters nor technocracy. Instead, in Griggs’s account, African-American volunteers willingly offer their bodies as human sandbags in order to prevent a levee from bursting and endangering the city behind it. In doing so, the text converts the genre’s conventional victims into hero-rescuers. By so designating African-Americans as protagonist-saviors, ‘Saving the Day’ reconstitutes the role of ‘victim’ in the disaster narrative – albeit through an act of bodily sacrifice. Thus the disaster narrative is not simply representational. Converting natural disaster into a narrative of disaster is ideological work. The genre doesn’t just depict cataclysm – it also fashions it.

Not all disaster narratives suffer the same descent into obscurity. Perhaps the most culturally prominent accounts, the catastrophe narratives which endure in public memory, are disaster films. And these movies have a pre-history: they were not the first catastrophic narratives to deploy scale, popularity and visual spectacle. The now obsolete panorama, cyclorama and cosmorama also allowed visitors to experience natural disaster rather than just read about it, and as such these "live theatrical spectacles" were a "clear

precursor to the cinema" (Bentley 39, 276).¹⁵ This nineteenth century innovation is "an immersive art...it recreates a virtual environment using non-electronic means" (Beebe). They were enormously popular. A cyclorama of the Great Chicago Fire was still drawing crowds in 1893 – more than twenty years after the disaster. At the Coney Island amusement park in Brooklyn, New York, the cyclorama became the cosmorama, as installations were made permanent and technologically elaborate. The deadly Galveston hurricane of 1900, for instance, was reenacted several times a day at Coney Island: "The city and harbor were recreated in miniature with model buildings. Then through a combination of real and fake water, large sheets of painted cotton fabric, intricate lighting and mechanical effects, the city was transformed into a state of utter destruction. A lecturer explained the sequence of events to the audience" (Stanton).¹⁶ Coney Island also boasted several other disaster entertainments. The eruption of Mount Vesuvius at Pompeii, the sinking of the Titanic, and the Johnstown Flood were all featured catastrophes. Nor were these disasters limited to the Brooklyn amusement park. Atlantic City hosted a long-running recreation of the Johnstown Flood; a similar scenographic representation of the disaster was on display at the 1901 Buffalo Pan-Am Exposition, and cycloramas of American natural disasters travelled as far afield as Germany and Sweden.¹⁷

¹⁵ Panoramas are large-scale, wide-angle photographs or images, which typically depict a historical event or landscape. Cycloramas are panoramas displayed inside a specially designed structure. In a cyclorama, the viewer doesn't just stand in front of a large-scale image, but is surrounded by it. Positioned on a small circular platform, the viewer is encircled by the image in 360°. Some cycloramas also used light and sound effects and live actors in the foreground to intensify the realism of the experience. As Nancy Bentley notes of the entertainment, "throughout the nineteenth century, the panorama had been a popular machine that intensified the interactive seam between realism and illusion by adding motion to the display of painted and later photographic images and scenes" (276).

¹⁶ The Galveston hurricane claimed between 6,000 and 12,000 lives, making it -- even to the present day -- the deadliest natural disaster in American history.

¹⁷ The nineteenth century, pre-film entertainment of the cyclorama is experiencing something of a revival. In 2011, as part of a project sponsored by the Coney Island Museum, artists Aaron Beebe and Joanna Ebenstein created 'The Great Coney Island Spectacularium.' An installation re-creating "a 19th century dime museum in a seaside resort," the project included 'The Cosmorama of the Great Dreamland Fire' – an immersive panorama with music as well as light and sound effects -- based on the historical 1911 fire at the Coney Island attraction. The exhibition closed on 25 August 2012, just weeks before Hurricane Sandy devastated Coney Island and the surrounding area.

But by the early twentieth century, panoramas had been largely eclipsed by the moving picture. The disaster narrative was a natural match with the medium of film, and from the earliest days of movie-making, catastrophes were popular subject matter. Indeed, the first disaster films were a goldmine for Hollywood, and filmmakers have returned to these stories again and again since they first appeared on the silver screen. *The Last Days of Pompeii*, first filmed in 1908, was re-made in 1913, 1935 and 1959. Similarly, the Titanic has sunk many times on movie screens, from the earliest films to the present day. *In Nacht und Eis* (1912), *Atlantis* (1913), *Atlantic* (1929), *Titanic* (1953), *A Night to Remember* (1958) and *The Unsinkable Molly Brown* (1964) all told the story of the White Star liner's catastrophic encounter with an iceberg in the North Atlantic. The formative disasters of historical earthquake and fire discussed earlier made it to the silver screen in *San Francisco* (1936) and *In Old Chicago* (1937). And only one year after the Great Mississippi Flood, the ur-disaster narrative later retold by James Weldon Johnson in *God's Trombones* became a film in 1928's *Noah's Ark*. A few years later, the scriptural tale was remade once more, this time by Walt Disney in *Father Noah's Ark* (1933). By then a long-established genre, the disaster movie reached new heights of popularity in the 1970s, when films such as *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972), *Earthquake* (1974) and *The Towering Inferno* (1974) dominated the box office.¹⁸ Several television movies of the same era also featured natural disasters, including *Hurricane* (1974), *The Day the Earth Moved* (1974), *Flood!* (1976) and *Fire!* (1977). In the 1990s and 2000s, the genre had another resurgence, with films such as *Twister* (1996), *Volcano* (1997), *Dante's Peak* (1997), *The Perfect Storm* (2000), *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004),

¹⁸ Despite their ubiquity, Stephen Keane asserts that "disaster movies have remained relatively neglected within film studies" (1). There are several key texts which illuminate the history and conventions of the genre. Susan Sontag's seminal article "The Imagination of Disaster" is regularly cited by critics as the first intellectually serious analysis of the genre. Writing in the 1960s, Sontag argued that disaster films' significance lies in their "intersection between a naively and largely debased commercial art product and the most profound dilemmas of the contemporary situation"(225). Nick Roddick's 'Only the Stars Survive: Disaster Movies in the Seventies' (1980) is a thorough reading of the genre in its heyday, and Roddick also identifies key characteristics of the disaster film, as does Maurice Yacowar in 'The Bug in the Rug: Notes on the Disaster Genre' (1977). Stephen Keane's *Disaster Movies: The Cinema of Catastrophe* (2006) is a useful example of contemporary criticism on the genre. Keane compares the profitable and popular disaster movies of the 1970s with the millennial disaster films of the 1990s. He also includes a comprehensive list of disaster films from the earliest days of cinema to the late 2000s, as well as an annotated bibliography of disaster film criticism. Max Page's *The City's End: Two Centuries of Fantasies, Fears, and Premonitions of New York's Destruction* (2008) is a focused account of the representation of New York City and its icons in disaster films.

and *2012* (2009). The most successful and influential of these recent disaster movies is of course *Titanic* (1997) – the highest-grossing film in history until it was unseated by *Avatar* (2009). And the genre continues to fascinate: *Pompeii* and *Noah* -- movies which re-tell iconic literary and historical disasters -- were released within weeks of each other in winter 2014.¹⁹

As the continuing popularity of disaster films suggests, America in recent years increasingly understands itself as a calamity-stricken nation. The notion that ours is an age of disaster is now a commonplace; as the definitive stance of post-modernity, “we think of the time in which we live [as] an age when uncontrollable disasters always threaten the fragile order we have imposed on chaos” (Huet 7). And this is nowhere more true than in the representation of ecological disasters. Zadie Smith's recent essay "Elegy for a Country's Seasons" suggests that catastrophic disaster has become normative. Smith laments not a particular cataclysm -- a specific flood or storm -- but instead the long emergency of climate change. She catalogues the effects of global warming, mourning the encroaching sameness of spring, summer, winter and fall. But Smith acknowledges that the catastrophe these changes portend isn't quite at hand: "The apocalypse is always usefully cast into the future—unless you happen to live in Mauritius, or Jamaica, or the many other perilous spots." The rhetoric of climate change is often apocalyptic -- Smith specifically notes the "visions of apocalypse conjured by climate scientists and movie directors." Climate change texts share this impulse with other apocalyptic narratives such as nuclear literature and accounts of speculative disasters. Like Smith's article, this archive is engaged with finitude -- the definitive characteristic of apocalypticism. For these texts imagine not just disaster, but world-ending disaster.²⁰ In this sense they constitute

¹⁹ There are many other films which are conventionally understood as disaster movies, but as they don't depict natural disasters, they haven't been included in this archive. These are films such as *King Kong* (1933) and other 'creature features'; *Airport* (1970), in which an explosion endangers an airplane in mid-flight; and *Independence Day* (1996), an alien movie in which humanity faces destruction by extra-terrestrials. Disaster films in which the agent of catastrophe is animalian, technological or alien are excluded here.

²⁰ While the apocalypticism of scriptural texts has long been recognized by critics, near the close of the twentieth century the end of the world also became a dominant theme in contemporary literature. Scholarship kept pace, and in the 1980s and 1990s many academic texts engaged with millennial anxieties. Malcolm Bull's influential *Seeing Things Hidden: Apocalypse, Vision and Totality* (2000) and *Apocalypse Theory and the Ends of the World* (1995) -- edited by Bull -- assert that apocalypticism is not on the fringes

"the fantasy of...an unprecedented, all-encompassing, and remainderless end" (Rosenthal 1).²¹ In apocalyptic narratives, futurity is not only uncertain -- it is impossible. It is useful to note, however, that narratives of historical natural disaster do not universally participate in this imagination of finitude. While the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 was indeed disastrous, it was not apocalyptic, nor was it commonly viewed as such. And while things do indeed end in disaster narratives -- many critics, for instance, view the 1927 deluge as the end of the virtual peonage of sharecropping -- history itself does not end. This distinction is evident in the characteristic assertion of the disaster narrative that nothing will ever be the same again. William Bradford declared of the 1635 hurricane that the "signs and marks of it will remain this hundred years." Although the landscape of colonial America was scarred by the disaster, the Puritan project continued: Bradford's projection of the century ahead assumes a future. Thus while the future may be irrevocably changed in disaster narratives, futurity is still imaginable.²²

While the disasters under discussion in this project aren't apocalyptic, they are catastrophic, record-shattering storm, flood and drought. The Dust Bowl, the Great Mississippi Flood and Hurricane Katrina were all, in their own time, unprecedented. Arthur M. Hyde, Hoover's Secretary of Agriculture, called the Dust Bowl "the worst drought ever recorded in this country" (Vowell 641). Historians have long recognized the Great Mississippi Flood as "the worst natural disaster in the nation's history" (Leuchtenburg 68). And Hurricane Katrina was, as *Times-Picayune* reporter Jed Horne put it, "like nothing we've ever seen before in America's history." This rhetoric of exceptionality suggests the breadth of the disasters' impact. As Kevin Rozario notes,

but at the heart of post-Enlightenment thought. See also Frank Kermode's important work on narrative theory in *The Sense of an Ending* (1967) and *American Apocalypses: The Image of the End of the World in American Literature* by Douglas Robinson (1985).

²¹ While much critical work on disaster and apocalypse invokes the notion of finitude, Lecia Rosenthal clearly outlines the relationship between finitude and catastrophe in *Mourning Modernism: Literature, Catastrophe and the Politics of Consolation* (2011).

²² This investment in aftermath is particularly clear in the texts of Hurricane Katrina -- the titles of which are insistently forward-oriented. Josh Neufeld's graphic novel depicting the real-life experiences of seven Katrina survivors is called *A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge* (2009). Similarly, visual artist Kara Walker's reflection on the disaster is entitled *After the Deluge* (2007). And a collection of critical essays shares the same impulse: *After the Storm: Black Intellectuals Explore the Meaning of Hurricane Katrina* (Troutt 2007). These texts not only find it possible to imagine a future; futurity is their methodology.

“disasters, and discourses of disasters, have played a long and influential role in the construction of American identities, power relations, economic systems and environmental practices” (3). During the Dust Bowl, 1927 flood and Hurricane Katrina, American writers sought to articulate the catastrophe, to find ways of expressing the impact and significance of what nature had done to America. As we shall see, this search is evident in the texts under discussion here. Chapter One examines the Dust Bowl as represented in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), Woody Guthrie's folk song 'This Land is Your Land' (1940) and documents of the National Park Service (1936). These disaster narratives demonstrate that asylum is defined both by an inviolable border, and by imaginative expansion beyond that defensible perimeter to borderless, abstracted, and infinite refuge.²³ Chapter Two examines the texts of the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927. Flood Relief Chairman Herbert Hoover's memoir (1952), President Calvin Coolidge's 1927 State of the Union Address as well as 'Saving the Day' (1928) -- a sermon by Rev. Sutton E. Griggs -- constitute a trenchant critique of the nationalized provision of refuge. Delving further into the 1927 flood, Chapter Three considers Richard Wright's short stories 'The Man Who Saw the Flood' (1937) and 'Down by the Riverside' (1938) as well as William Faulkner's novella *Old Man* (1939).²⁴ These texts

²³ There are many other examples of Dust Bowl literature, including *An Empire of Dust*, Lawrence Svobida's 1940 memoir of life in the drought; Frederick Manfred's Dust Bowl novel *The Golden Bowl* (1944); Ann Marie Low's *Dust Bowl Diary* (1984); Carey McWilliams' *Factories in the Fields* (1939); Lois Phillips Hudson's novel *The Bones of Plenty* (1962) and short story collection *Reapers of the Dust: A Prairie Chronicle* (1957) and John Steinbeck's first Dust Bowl novel, *Of Mice and Men* (1937). John Ise's *Sod and Stubble: The Story of a Kansas Homestead* (1936) was written during and inspired by the 1930s disaster, but is set during a nineteenth-century drought. Called "hugely influential" by the Smithsonian, Woody Guthrie's *Dust Bowl Ballads* (1940) is a collection of tunes featuring migrant workers. John Ford's iconic film *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) was not the only movie to depict the drought of the 1930s; Pare Lorentz's *The Plow that Broke the Plains* (1936) is an impressionistic documentary of the Dust Bowl. With the sponsorship of the New Deal Resettlement Administration, Lorentz also made *The River* (1938), a documentary about the Mississippi River and how the erosion of riverbank topsoil due to logging and farming inadvertently encouraged disastrous flooding.

²⁴ The disaster narratives of the Great Mississippi Flood include the many blues songs inspired by the deluge. David Evans' comprehensive 'High Water Everywhere: Blues and Gospel Commentary on the 1927 Mississippi River Flood' lists the musical texts of the catastrophe, but prominent examples include Bessie Smith's 'Back-Water Blues,' (1927); Blind Lemon Jefferson's 'Rising High Water Blues' (1927); Kansas Joe and Memphis Minnie's 'When the Levee Breaks' (1929), which was re-recorded by Led Zeppelin in 1971; and Charley Patton's 'High Water Everywhere,' Parts 1 and 2 (1929). With the sponsorship of the New Deal Resettlement Administration, Pare Lorentz, who made the Dust Bowl film *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, also filmed *The River* (1938). A documentary about the Mississippi River, the film depicts how the erosion of riverbank topsoil due to logging and farming inadvertently encouraged disastrous flooding. Sterling Brown's poems 'Ma Rainey' and 'Cabaret' (1932) both depict the

demonstrate how racialized asylum subverts the conventions of the disaster narrative's promise of catastrophic renewal. Concluding with a contemporary disaster, Chapter Four examines Dave Eggers' *Zeitoun* (2009), James Lee Burke's short story 'Jesus Out to Sea' (2006) and Spike Lee's documentary film *When the Levees Broke* (2006). In these Hurricane Katrina narratives, refuge's doubled nature is revealed, and asylum is re-configured as perilous as well as sheltering.²⁵

performance of blues songs about the 1927 flood. Artistic interest in the 1927 disaster endures: *Southern Cross the Dog* (2013), a recent novel by Bill Cheng, features an African-American flood refugee, and the highly acclaimed documentary film *The Great Flood* (2013) uses film fragments and music – with no commentary -- to create an evocative narrative of the disaster and its impact on African-American life.

²⁵ There are many Hurricane Katrina texts, and the archive continues to grow. These disaster narratives are various, and include *Salvage the Bones* by Jesmyn Ward (2011), Paul Volponi's tween story *Hurricane Song* (2009), and Mat Johnson and Simon Gane's graphic novel *Dark Rain* (2010). Katrina crime novels are a particularly popular genre, including James Lee Burke's *The Tin Roof Blowdown* (2007); *Murder in the Rue Chartres* by Greg Herren (2007); *First The Dead: A Bug Man Novel* by Tim Downs (2008) and *Tubby Meets Katrina* by Anthony P. Dunbar (2006). There are also many acclaimed non-fiction accounts of the disaster, such as *I Dead in Attic* (2006), by *Times-Picayune* columnist Chris Rose; Dan Baum's *Nine Lives* (2009) and Tom Piazza's *Why New Orleans Matters* (2005). Films set during or in the aftermath of Katrina include *The Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans* (2009); *New Orleans Mon Amour* (2008); and *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012) as well as film documentaries *Trouble the Water* (2008); *The Axe in the Attic* (2007); and *Kamp Katrina* (2007). FOX-TV's television series *K-ville* (2007) and HBO's *Tremé* (2010-13) are both set in post-Katrina New Orleans. The disaster also inspired much music, including entire albums such as Elvis Costello & Allen Toussaint's *The River In Reverse* (2006); Terence Blanchard's *A Tale Of God's Will (A Requiem For Katrina)* (2007) – which also serves as the score to Spike Lee's documentary *When the Levees Broke*; and New Orleans native Dr. John's *City That Care Forgot* (2008). In addition, many hip hop artists have released songs about Katrina, including Mos Def's 'Dollar Day (Katrina Clap)' (2005); Public Enemy's 'Hell No We Ain't Alright!' (2005); The Legendary K.O.'s 'George Bush Don't Like Black People' (2005); OutKast featuring Lil Wayne and Snoop Dogg's, 'Hollywood Divorce' (2006); Juvenile's 'Get Your Hustle On' (2006); and Mos Def, Lenny Kravitz, Preservation Hall Band, Trombone Shorty and Tim Robbins' 'It Ain't My Fault' (2010). Finally, fine artists and photographers have also engaged with Katrina, including Jane Fulton Alt's *Look And Leave* (2009) and Kara Walker's *After the Deluge* (2007), in which Walker connects her pre-Katrina silhouettes to the disaster. This is far from an exhaustive list of the cultural production of Hurricane Katrina, but these texts are representative and many are critically acclaimed.

Chapter 1

'I been a-wonderin' why we can't do that all over':

Expansionist Asylum in the American Dust Bowl

I guess you've heard about ev'ry kind of blues,
I guess you've heard about ev'ry kind of blues,
But when the dust gets high, you can't even see the sky.

Well, it turned my farm into a pile of sand,
Yes, it turned my farm into a pile of sand,
I had to hit that road with a bottle in my hand.

--'Dust Bowl Blues,' Woody Guthrie

In the 1930s, America endured a natural disaster which Secretary of Agriculture Arthur M. Hyde called "the worst drought ever recorded in this country" (Vowell 641). Yet, when compared to the violent presence of other natural disasters, drought seems oddly inert. Defined by absence, it does not evoke urgent catastrophe. While danger is imminent when the Mississippi River bursts its banks or a hurricane bears down on New Orleans, a persistent lack of precipitation is less immediately dramatic. This may be why dust storms don't figure prominently in the public imagination of apocalyptic disasters. Unlike floods, fires, erupting volcanoes and hurricanes, dust storms are not, for instance, a staple of disaster movies. As a natural disaster, it does not evoke a singular, iconic moment of mortal threat -- no one runs for their life from a quickly moving drought. But millions of Americans did run for their lives from the Dust Bowl, abandoning the Great Plains and heading for California. And despite this cultural aporia, the storms of the

1930s Dust Bowl were both vast and deadly. The worst of the black blizzards came on April 14, 1935 -- a day that came to be known as Black Sunday:

As the black wall approached, car radios clicked off, overwhelmed by the static. Ignitions shorted out. Waves of sand, like ocean water over a ship's prow, swept over roads. Cars went into ditches. A train derailed...The storm carried twice as much dirt as was dug out of the earth to create the Panama Canal...More than 300,000 tons of Great Plains topsoil was airborne that day. (Egan 7-8)

On Black Sunday, the landscape of the Great Plains looked vastly different than it had for thousands of years before. Until the 1920s, the Great Plains -- which run east of the Rocky Mountains and west of the Mississippi River, all the way from Canada to Mexico - - were a sweeping grassland. During the 1920s, much of this tall grass prairie was torn up and converted to farmland. Wheat was the cash crop of choice in the 'Great Plow-Up,' and during the 1920s America grew more of it than ever before. These record-high production levels were driven by unprecedented prices: "In 1910, the price of wheat stood at eighty cents a bushel...five years later the price had doubled" (Egan 42). Because of wheat's remarkable profitability, more and more grassland was torn up and planted. Between 1917 and 1919 alone, there was a 70% increase in wheat-producing acres on the Great Plains (Egan 43).

But the boom was not sustainable. As Timothy Egan notes of the plowing under of America's tall grass prairie, "the farmers of the High Plains were laying the foundation for a time bomb that would shatter the natural world" (42). By 1929, a farmer who had made \$10,000 on wheat crops only four years earlier had to double his acreage to earn the same profit (Egan 59). As farmers struggled to keep wheat production high, more and more parcels of the Great Plains were plowed under. In this conversion of grassland to farmland, the prairie was pulled out by its roots, killing the plant and leaving no re-growth behind. When the unusually wet period of the 1920s came to an end and drought hit, there was simply nothing left to hold the soil down. Winds rose, the earth parched, and dust storms stalked the Great Plains for nearly a decade. In some areas, it didn't rain

for ten years. The southern Plains were particularly stricken, and suffered most from blizzards made of sand:

Dust clouds boiled up, ten thousand feet or more in the sky, and rolled like moving mountains...The Red Cross handed out respiratory masks to schools...[S]haking someone's hand could knock two people down, for the static electricity from the dusters was so strong. Cattle went blind and suffocated. When farmers cut them open, they found stomachs stuffed with fine sand...Children coughed and gagged, dying of something the doctors called 'dust pneumonia.' (Egan 7, 5-6)

The Dust Bowl was unparalleled in American history. No natural disaster had endured for so long or displaced as many people. Historian Pamela Riney-Kehrberg describes the scale of the decade which came to be known as the Dirty '30s: "The Dust Bowl is one of the worst sustained environmental disasters in American history. It's not something that happens in just one year, it's not something that just lasts for three or four years. It's a decade. Because of the combination of extreme drought and extreme high temperatures, this is the worst ten year period in recorded history on the plains" ("The Dust Bowl"). And even as the Dust Bowl hollowed out America's heartland, the nation endured the worst economic disaster in its history. This "crucible of drought and dust and depression" resulted in unprecedented internal displacement. By 1940, 2.5 million Americans had fled the Great Plains and its dust storms. These domestic refugees spread out over the country, many heading for California, taking to the roads looking for work.

John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) is the definitive text of the Dust Bowl.²⁶ The novel tells the story of the Joad family, who flee the Oklahoma dustbowl for

²⁶ Critical reception of *The Grapes of Wrath* has, from its initial publication, recognized the novel as protest fiction. Many early reviewers lauded Steinbeck's text as a great work of social conscience, if not as great literature. Barbara A. Heavilin describes this strain of scholarship as concern with what the text *does* rather than what it *is*. An early example is Malcolm Cowley's review in the *New Republic*. Cowley declared that Steinbeck's novel "doesn't rank with the best of Hemingway or Dos Passos. But it belongs very high in the category of the great angry books like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that have roused a people to fight against intolerable wrongs." The comparison to Stowe's novel was common among reviewers, who placed Steinbeck's work in the same tradition -- both in terms of its power and its aesthetic flaws. Among Cowley's contemporaries, Clifton Fadiman's review of *The Grapes of Wrath* in the *New Yorker* similarly praises the novel's message rather than its craftsmanship. But Fadiman's distaste for Steinbeck's aesthetics is also

the promised land of California. Lured by flyers guaranteeing good jobs for anyone willing to work, they discover instead an industrial farming monopoly which promises the land of milk and honey only in order to flood the labour market and lower wages. In California, the Joads slowly starve to death. Finally, they flee to a government camp, and there find temporary asylum. The camp – called Weedpatch – is a federal project, part of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal initiatives, and it is startlingly different from the Joads’ experience of California. So different, in fact, that they cannot believe it's real. “God Almighty, I can’t hardly believe it!” Tom Joad exclaims, when told that the camp committee disciplines its own residents (393). In the government camp, the peripatetic Joads temporarily remain in a single place. A base from which to continue the daily search for paid labour, Weedpatch itself does not provide employment, but is instead a place of safety, hygiene and some guarantee of food. Steinbeck's Weedpatch was not a fictional creation. Based on a real government camp, like its fictional counterpart, Weedpatch constituted an alternative to ‘Hooverilles’ -- the makeshift shanty towns built by the increasing numbers of homeless Americans during the 1930s.²⁷ The camps were the Roosevelt administration's attempt to ameliorate the worst of era's poverty.²⁸ The first camp opened in 1935, near Marysville, California, with Tom Collins

representative of another enduring critical response to *The Grapes of Wrath*. Fadiman decries the novel's sentimentality -- particularly as evidenced in the text's final scene, in which Rose of Sharon, recently delivered of a stillborn baby, breastfeeds a starving man. Fadiman famously criticized this concluding scene as "the tawdriest kind of fake symbolism" -- an opinion shared by critics such as Edmund Wilson, Leslie Fiedler, Warren French and Harold Bloom, all of whom disparage the novel's sentimentality. In a common critical assessment, Bloom acknowledges that *The Grapes of Wrath* is Steinbeck's best book, and yet echoes Fiedler's judgment that the text is nevertheless "maudlin, sentimental, and overblown" (12). As the critical status of sentimentality has shifted, there has been some resulting scholarly re-assessment of Steinbeck's novel. As Heavilin notes, even denunciations such as Fiedler and Bloom's acknowledge the power of *The Grapes of Wrath*, suggesting that aesthetic merit is neither an objective or comprehensive measurement of literary value.

²⁷ Hooverilles were so named for President Herbert Hoover, who was in office through the first years of the Great Depression, and was widely held responsible for the economic disaster. The slums usually consisted of tents or tiny shacks built of found materials such as wooden crates or cardboard boxes. Often erected on empty public land, there were also Hooverilles in public parks -- most notably, in New York City's Riverside and Central Parks.

²⁸ Migrant labour camps such as Weedpatch were developed by the Resettlement Administration (RA), a government department created by Roosevelt in April 1935. The RA also sponsored a wide range of other projects, including a Public Health Section, which provided medical and dental care, as well as the delivery of electricity to rural America through agencies such as the influential Tennessee Valley Authority. In 1937, the Resettlement Administration was subsumed into the Farm Security Administration (FSA); the primary goal of this agency was to assist farmers who were suffering from both economic depression and

as camp manager – the same Tom to whom John Steinbeck dedicates *The Grapes of Wrath*. Over the rest of the decade, the project expanded, and “by the end of 1942, [there were] ninety-five camps, with accommodations for approximately 75,000 people” (Baldwin 222).

The government camps housed thousands of homeless Americans who fled the Dust Bowl for California. But in addition to this urgent material purpose, the camps had a theoretical valence as well. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Weedpatch embodies asylum's zone of exception. Distinguished by its defensible perimeter, the government camp is set apart from the space which surrounds it. The inviolable perimeter -- that definitive element of sanctuary -- encircles Weedpatch and sets it apart. Indeed, it is vital, for without the border, asylum's zone of exception does not exist. This defensible perimeter, and its ability to repel incursion and encircle refuge, is also characteristic of the National Park Service (NPS). America's national parks exist precisely in order to enclose and protect endangered landscapes. Definitive spaces of refuge, parks constitute sanctuary for both old-growth forests and the citizens who hike the Grand Canyon. And during the 1930s, the NPS experienced unprecedented growth. As the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl ravaged the nation, New Deal programs put unemployed Americans like the Joads to work in national parks. In 'Atmosphere in the National Parks' (1936), John R. White addresses the question of the NPS's enduring vulnerability and the extent of refuge's borders. Like *The Grapes of Wrath* and Superintendent White's address, Woody Guthrie's enduringly popular folk song “This Land is Your Land” (1940) also engages with the bordered space of asylum. Guthrie was himself a Dust Bowl refugee, and his signature song explicitly invokes the crises of the 1930s. But even as these texts assert the essential nature of the inviolable perimeter, they are inherently expansionist. Steinbeck, White and Guthrie move beyond the border, from enclosure to expansion. In

the drought afflicting the Great Plains. FSA projects included teaching new and sustainable farming practices, providing credit for new equipment and livestock, and resettling families from exhausted and eroded land. The FSA also established camps such as Weedpatch for migrant workers. In order to garner public support for its programs, the FSA documented and publicized the living conditions of migrant workers. Its Photography Unit paid unemployed photographers and artists to record rural poverty. The images exposed the nation -- especially the urban northeast -- to the dustbowl and created a photographic archive of the disaster. Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans are the best-known FSA photographers; Lange's 'Migrant Mother' was taken under the auspices of the Photography Unit program.

these texts, asylum is imaginatively extended beyond the inviolable perimeter, and this expansionism is accompanied by an increasing turn to the abstract. In these texts, asylum shifts from the decidedly material, such as migrant labour camps, to the more conceptual, such as Guthrie's evocative but nonspecific "freedom highway." Thus while sanctuary is initially defined as strictly bounded and determinedly concrete, these disaster narratives ultimately demonstrate an ambiguous investment in their own definition of sanctuary. In these Dust Bowl disaster narratives, the expansion of refuge is a nationalizing gesture. Asylum is restricted not only to Weedpatch or Yosemite, but extended to the nation entire.

Bordering the Space of Refuge:

Lots of folks back East, they say, is leavin' home every day,
 Beatin' the hot old dusty way to the California line.
 'Cross the desert sands they roll, gettin' out of that old dust bowl,
 They think they're goin' to a sugar bowl, but here's what they find
 Now, the police at the port of entry say,
 "You're number fourteen thousand for today."
 --'Do Re Mi,' Woody Guthrie

Essential to the government camp's sanctuary is the ability to maintain its borders and repel incursion. When the Joads first arrive at Weedpatch, Tom is amazed to discover that the state and local police are not allowed entry; the camp polices itself (393). This internal discipline is one of the camp's most significant and memorable features; when Tom is on the run, he recollects that in the camp "if they was a fight they fixed it theirselves; an' they wasn't no cops wagglin' their guns, but they was better order than them cops ever give" (571). The border is what allows the camps to function as sanctuary, and when the Joads first decide to go to Weedpatch, the camp is explicitly structured as a kind of refuge. Tom's recent encounter with state police has left him shaken and worried about his capacity for restraint in the face of state-sponsored violence. When Ma asks Tom where he's taking them, he replies, "Gonna look for that government camp...A fella said they don't let no deputies in there. Ma – I got to get away from 'em. I'm scairt I'll

kill one” (383). Thus for Tom, Weedpatch constitutes asylum from both a violently corrupt police force and also from his own resistance to such corruption. It is a place where danger cannot attend the Joads – either the danger of police brutality or the danger of their own response. Later, once the Joads have experienced life in the camp, they come to value it for other kinds of sanctuary, for it also constitutes refuge from hunger, isolation, filth, and dehumanization. But when Tom first turns the Joads’ car towards Weedpatch, after being rousted from a Hooverville by armed locals and police, the camp offers asylum from the inevitable transformation of Tom Joad into a murderer. And this criminalization of the asylum seeker is not limited to Tom Joad. Ranjana Khanna suggests that the asylum seeker "should be understood as a...criminal when in passage. He or she is exiled from one site and without rights in another" (373). No longer in Oklahoma, neither are the Joads at home in California. It is only within Weedpatch -- which exists outside of state power -- that the family finds asylum.

This impenetrable border which is so vital to Tom Joad is likewise essential to asylum; without a secure boundary sanctuary cannot exist, for the inviolable space offers no protection if it may be breached at will. If the borders of asylum are not strictly drawn and defended, then refuge is meaningless. *The Grapes of Wrath* repeatedly insists upon such defensibility. The boundaries which define the government camp are strictly patrolled, and its inviolability is insistently and obsessively returned to throughout the novel. Indeed, the distinguishing feature of Weedpatch is its impermeability, as Tom notes when he first brings his family to the government camp. Weedpatch of course constitutes asylum for the Joads because it excludes the police. But Tom’s confession to Ma highlights more than simply who is expelled – it emphasizes the power of expulsion itself. Thus while it’s the particular exclusion of the police that catches Tom’s attention here, it is the act of expulsion in general which structures asylum. Indeed, as we shall see, the exclusivity of sanctuary is particularly evident in the texts of Hurricane Katrina, which highlight the necessarily selective nature of refuge and reveal asylum’s doubled nature - as both expelling and sheltering. But in *The Grapes of Wrath*, it is the ability to repel incursion and maintain an inviolable border that is repeatedly invoked. As one resident tells Tom, “[T]hat’s why they hate this here camp. No cops can get in” (456). Similarly, the watchman who welcomes the Joads to Weedpatch tells Tom not to worry

about the state police: “They don’t get in here...Some nights the boys patrol the fences, ’specially dance nights” (393). On another occasion, a farmer who warns migrant residents about a planned incursion notes, “[T]he Association don’t like the government camps. Can’t get a deputy in there. The people make their own laws, I hear, and you can’t arrest a man without a warrant” (404). Again and again, characters return to this ability to repel incursion and make law, and the border reverberates throughout *The Grapes of Wrath*.

But Weedpatch’s strict perimeter is not simply described – it is also enacted. One night, a sympathetic farmer warns Tom that state deputies plan to start a fight at a camp dance in order to gain entrance to Weedpatch. Faced with such incursion, the residents organize in their own defence. When a trio of intruders tries to start a riot, the ‘Entertainment Committee’ surrounds the men and hustles them off the dance floor. As Weedpatch residents literally enclose the threat, the committee chairman signals the fiddler to begin playing and the dance continues without interruption.²⁹ Once off the floor, the “moving squad” breaks open and the Committee members question the intruders (469). ““That sure was did nice,”” Tom comments, as “he held both arms of his victim from behind” (469). The bodies of the Entertainment Committee residents encircle the threat, contain and dispel it. In doing so they echo the zone of exception – they return the outside to the outside and prevent the threat from spreading further into the inviolable space. Border security is maintained non-violently here, and the exercise of restraint is notable. Maintenance of inviolability is the goal, and this purpose is not permitted to be endangered by physical violence. Although some residents want to assault the intruders, Mr Huston – the committee chair – prevents such action, reminding the men, “If you blood ‘em up, why – them deputies’ll git you” (454). Nevertheless, Mr. Huston himself is not immune to anger; when musing on the Associated Farmers’ corrupt labour practices, he declares “I swear to God they gonna push us into fightin’ if they don’t quit a-worryin’ us” (456). But the chairman immediately quells even his own violent impulse: “Then he calmed his voice. ‘We jes’ got to keep peaceful,’ he reminded

²⁹ In an interesting historical connection between the texts under discussion here, the folk song ‘John Henry’ is played at the Weedpatch dance. In 2007, Bruce Springsteen covered ‘John Henry’ on an album called ‘The Seeger Sessions’ in honour of Pete Seeger, whose version of ‘This Land is Your Land’ made the song famous.

himself. “The committee got no right to fly off’n the handle” (456). Mr Huston’s restraint prevails, and the three men are removed from the camp without any bodily harm. This exercise of moderation and the lack of physical recrimination are significant – as are Huston’s reasons for eschewing violence. The practical desire to deny state deputies the opportunity to pursue assault charges and therefore access to Weedpatch is paramount here. But note that Mr Huston cools his own passions in terms of rights discourse. The committee has an obligation beyond sentiment or visceral response to oppression. Indeed, sentiment here is dangerous and even foolhardy – an indulgence of personal frustration which does not defend the perimeter. Resistance is rechanneled here – reformed and redirected from personal vengeance to institutional protection. As Huston says, it’s “[t]he *committee*” that’s got “no right to fly off’n the handle” (456, italics mine). It is the corporate body of the Entertainment Committee which has no right to react in anger, despite what its individual members may be feeling.³⁰ Here the interest of the collective prevails and the desire for revenge is rendered firmly subordinate to the maintenance of the inviolable zone. In this way the dance sequence is representative of Weedpatch as a whole: the camp’s defensible border is its *sine qua non*, and thus a strictly drawn perimeter supersedes other concerns.

Once the inviolable perimeter is identified as essential to Weedpatch, attention is returned to the nature of the space it encloses. What exactly exists inside the border? What is in need of such assiduous protection? The sanctuary constituted by the government camp is both unusual and strictly defined. As one camp resident tells another, “You know a vagrant is anybody a cop don’t like. An’ that’s why they hate this here camp. No cops can get in. This here’s United States, not California” (456). Significantly, both here and in the dance sequence, what makes Weedpatch “America” and not “California” is the exclusion of state disciplinary agencies. The migrant camp

³⁰ The question of the historical Okies’ political beliefs is contested. In *Dust Bowl Migration in the American Imagination*, Charles Shindo argues -- in the tradition of James Gregory’s *American Exodus* -- that migrant workers have been radically misrepresented by liberal artists. Shindo claims that artists such as Steinbeck, Woody Guthrie, Dorothea Lange and John Ford appropriated the figure of the migrant worker in order to advance progressive political goals. In doing so, the liberals perpetuated a fictional, figurative ‘Okie’ who stood for progressive values, and who was in stark contrast to the real Okies, who were generally political conservatives. This program of deliberate and canny misrepresentation was so successful, Shindo claims, that it has come to replace the reality of the Okie in popular American memory.

slips the bonds of California territory not because of its social programs or credit-extension policy. Instead, the novel insists that what makes Weedpatch "America" is its successful expulsion of state power. As their fellow resident tells the Joads of the camp, "No cops can get in." A border which expels state police, then, is what constitutes Weedpatch's exceptionalism -- its ability to remain a federal enclave even as it lies within California territory. In this way, the camp's borders protect its residents against the very state it inhabits. And while asylum in *The Grapes of Wrath* excludes the state, it does not simply replace California police with federal authorities. Just as the state police can't get in, neither is there any federal law enforcement in the camp. The nation does not police Weedpatch; the camp is not an outpost of federal authority. Instead, Weedpatch is a self-governing island of independence guaranteed by federal power. In Steinbeck's vision of asylum, then, external regulation fundamentally undermines refuge. Sanctuary is constituted by its ability to expel and by extension, to self-discipline. For while the novel also depicts Weedpatch as self-governing, the dance sequence emphasizes *police* power and not civil authority. It is the inviolable perimeter's expulsion of external disciplinary power which defines asylum here.

Beyond the precise nature of the excluded subjects, the camp resident's advice to the Joads is notable for the remarkable scope of its claim. "This here's United States," he says, "not California." This distinction between the two is profound, even fantastical: the government camp is national rather than state soil; America rather than California. The difference between federal and state control here is significant. It is the difference between the ideal and the prosaic, between citizen and migrant, between inalienable rights and utter dispossession. In the government camp, then, the Joads are Americans. Outside of it, they are merely Okies. This rupture between state and nation is of course functional: it permits continued idealization of America. The federal government remains at the level of ideal, of 'America' as concept, while the state of California is embodied government, the corrupt and despised familiar. The material experience of power is local, while asylum is decidedly national here – it is unrealized at the state level. In this sense, then, the novel then can be read as a hymn to federalism. Certainly, freighted with significance, in *The Grapes of Wrath* the federal encampment is American mythology compressed. But refuge is not always exclusively nationalized in Steinbeck's

novel. It is not America but California which first embodies idealized refuge in the text. As the Joads fled the Dust Bowl and headed west, they believed they were journeying at last towards sanctuary. Indeed, the text opens not with an idyllic vision of the nation, but with a mythology of California as the promised land. The flyers which lured the Joads and other migrants to the West Coast depicted not simply survival, but abundance. For the travelers, California is not merely a place of available jobs with good wages – miraculous enough, in the midst of the Great Depression – but also a fabled land free from all want and deprivation. Ma Joad recounts this mythology when she tells Tom that people say California is “Never cold. An’ fruit ever’place, an’...little white houses in among the orange trees...if we all get jobs and all work – maybe we can get one of them little white houses. An’ the little fellas go out an’ pick oranges right off the tree” (124). The West Coast then is a place where basic needs are met as easily as picking free fruit off a tree, and even the seemingly impossibly middle-class aspiration of owning a home is feasible. In contrast to this fable of plenty, then, the text's assertion that Weedpatch *is* America functions as a diminution. For as a representation of the idealized nation, Weedpatch is wretchedly small in scope – the scale of the city on a hill is severely curtailed here, and the great promise of America is reduced to a single space, and a laundry list of basic infrastructure and bureaucracy. If the government camp is America, then America *is* the camp – and almost nothing more. This is what makes the camp “America”: indoor plumbing, food for the starving, extension of credit to the truly desperate, self-governance, and the ability to protect oneself against both incursion and harassment. Weedpatch as asylum, then, is both America incarnate and simultaneously marks America's failure. Just as the idealized sanctuary of California is quickly bankrupted in *The Grapes of Wrath*, so too does the text fail to endorse the narrative of America as asylum extant. For Tom Joad, Weedpatch is the model but not the incarnation of perfected refuge.

This diminished America reminds us that more is at stake here than simply the fate of the Joad family. The border's necessity emphasizes the failure of sanctuary, and Weedpatch's singularity performs two simultaneous tasks. First, it asserts that American ideals do work on a small scale, and are not simply the province of ideologues and arcane legislation, but are pressingly relevant to ordinary citizens. Second – and in contrast to

the first claim – the camp asserts that the diminution of such ideals to a single encampment of starving Americans constitutes a crisis. The border around the camp should not be so important – it should not bear the weight of the survival of hundreds of people. So much should not hang on a defensible perimeter. And yet, although violation of the border is catastrophic, Steinbeck ultimately argues not for its defense but for its removal. Safeguarding the perimeter is essential, as the dance sequence demonstrates. But the novel itself is restless. The defensible border is rendered inadequate here. Immediately after the incursion is successfully put down, the Joads leave Weedpatch. To accept the border would be to acquiesce to the radical diminution of America, rendering it something less than the great republic. In contrast, the novel's ideal is porousness and proliferation. Freed from borders, asylum will not be confined to a tiny enclave, but spread outwards to reclaim America as a whole. This pattern of expansion is in marked contrast to the establishment and defense of a strict boundary. Unexpected and even counter-intuitive, the very element on which asylum depends is dismantled in Steinbeck's novel, deemed inadequate even as it is utterly necessary.

The novel's expansionist vision of asylum is most evident in the speech made famous by Henry Fonda in John Ford's 1940 film version of *The Grapes of Wrath*. After the Joads leave Weedpatch, Casy is murdered by strike busters and Tom in turn kills the preacher's executioner. In hiding from the police, Tom realizes he must leave the family and strike out on his own or endanger them all. During a final conversation with his mother, Tom sets out the novel's theory of asylum. As Tom's final appearance in the novel, this exchange is freighted with finality – these are his last words, his blessing and prophecy. Ma asks how she'll know whether Tom is all right, and where he'll be. He replies:

I'll be all aroun' in the dark. I'll be ever'where – wherever you look. Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever they's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there...*If Casy knowed*, why, I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad an' – I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry an' they know supper's ready. An' when our folks eat the stuff they raise an' live in the houses they build – why, I'll be there (572, italics mine).

In this passage Tom declares his ubiquity: he will be “ever’where – wherever you look” – and he is signified by everything. Echoing his call for expansionist asylum here is the expansion of Tom’s own body – no longer bounded by corporeal limits, Tom becomes an idea rather than a man, a watchword and not simply a criminal on the run. More than an individual, here Tom is abstracted into an omnipresent signifier. And it is not just Tom who is universalized here, but the suffering as well. Stripped of the specificity of the Dust Bowl, Tom’s vision imagines him present with *all* hungry people -- not only his own family, or even all Dust Bowl refugees. Instead, here the novel leaves behind the particular context of the Joads and instead makes a claim for a universalized community of asylees. And his vision is not simply one of oppression. He imagines moments of revolt as well – Tom will be present not simply among the starving, but where the starving fight back: “wherever they’s a fight so hungry people can eat” (572). Resistance is as ubiquitous as Tom himself in this passage. Just as Tom and suffering will be “ever’where,” so will revolt. Notably, Tom takes for granted that the starving will have to fight in order to eat, and that police brutality will continue. Resistance is rendered commonplace here; the daily occurrences of hunger and oppression are regularly met with defiant struggle. The future Tom imagines is not without strife, not a wholly utopic vision. But it does contain a kind of idealism: Tom continues to invoke moments of violent frustration in the cry of the angry man, but hunger is finally satiated in this passage. The children are still hungry in the latter part of his speech, but their hunger can be soothed, and no one is starving: “I’ll be in the way kids laugh when they’re hungry an’ they know supper’s ready” (572). Tom Joad’s fantasy concludes with “our folks” transcending hunger and feeding and housing themselves (572). This community of the dispossessed, imaginatively widened here beyond migrant American workers, becomes the guarantor of its own survival.

This final image interestingly excludes Weedpatch. The migrant labour camps, it becomes clear, are not Tom Joad’s ideal. His vision is instead one of asylum rendered permanent -- and of a world in which Weedpatch is thereby made unnecessary. In this passage refuge extends beyond camp borders, and asylum itself is imaginatively extended. The text’s vision of refuge is metaphorized in the expansion of Tom Joad’s body. Just as Tom’s corporeal self dematerializes in his visions into omnipresence, so too

is refuge expanded beyond the borders of Weedpatch and into a wider dream of universal sanctuary. Indeed, the novel's theory of asylum is inherently expansionist – the housing and food provided by the New Deal camps is still the desired goal, but in Tom's final vision these necessities are self-made rather than secured by the government. Tom sees his people's future not within the confines of Weedpatch but outside of it, where they are not starving and homeless but able to provide their own shelter and nourishment. The real asylum here – the desired and lasting sanctuary – is homemade, not mass-produced government infrastructure. Asylum here is fashioned by self-reliance; sanctuary is represented as independent agrarian communities, sheltered from the economic violence of sharecropping and the disciplinary violence of the state. Tom's vision of self-reliant liberalism renders the camps ultimately inadequate and unsatisfying. Prosaic and essential, Weedpatch is unmasked in Tom Joad's vision as not truly the stuff of dreams, not the heart's wish.

Yet although the government camp is not Tom's ideal, his vision is inspired by Weedpatch. The New Deal camps, then, are not superlative but rather a tangible example of the possible. They are both inspiration and archetype. During his last conversation with his mother, Tom connects Weedpatch to his vision of expansionist asylum:

‘I been thinkin’ how it was in that gov’ment camp, how our folks took care a theirselves, an’ if they was a fight they fixed it theirself; an’ they wasn’t no cops wagglin’ their guns, but they was better order than them cops ever give. I been a-wonderin’ why we can’t do that all over. Throw out the cops that ain’t our people. All work together for our own thing – all farm our own lan’. (571)

This is the novel's essential articulation of expansionist asylum: “I been a-wonderin’ why we can’t do that all over.” Tom Joad imagines Weedpatch rendered infinite here, in myriad ways. The government camp is not merely replicated -- Tom's vision is not one of a landscape populated with government camps. Nor is it a dream restricted to just the Joads, or even to migrant workers. Neither does Tom limit his vision solely to California. Instead, his vision is extended to "all over." The lack of specificity here -- the abstraction of "all over" -- serves to make Tom's vision more capacious. This phrasing places no

geo-political limits on the dream of expansionist asylum. And despite this expansion to almost unlimited extents, Tom's vision is not speculative. That is, it is recognizably realistic -- it is not a utopia displaced in time or space. Nor is Tom's imagined asylum made of return or restoration. He does not dream of merely re-capturing the life his family had before the Dust Bowl. Instead, his vision is an explicit rejection of sharecropping – the economic system the Joads laboured under in Oklahoma. But Tom's dream *is* agricultural, and in this sense asylum in *The Grapes of Wrath* is explicitly pastoral. It is “our own lan” that Tom wants to farm, not land belonging to another. Ownership is key to this vision, but it is ownership by individual farmers and not agricultural corporations. Tom does not dream of becoming the Associated Farmers -- the monopoly that dominates California agriculture -- but rather of smallness, independence, self-reliance and community. Notably, this modest dream is also accompanied by self-sufficiency. In Tom’s vision of refuge, “our folks [will] eat the stuff they raise an’ live in the houses they build” (572). This imagined community can support itself, is not dependent on charity, and is free from the yoke of sharecropping. It is thus a vision of smallness, which is distinct from diminution.³¹ This is not America writ pathetic, but a dream of freedom from an oppressive economic system. And it is not a new dream: it explicitly echoes the agrarian vision of Jeffersonian democracy.³² The yeoman farmer who works the land and eschews organized capital is the basis of Jefferson’s ideal republic: “Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God.” In this sense, then, Tom's vision of expansionist asylum is fundamentally American. And, just as for the founding fathers, Tom Joad's vision links territory to political destiny. Asylum in *The Grapes of Wrath* does not consist solely of farming your own land; rather, Tom associates independent cultivation with political subjectivity. He remembers how in Weedpatch, “our folks took care a theirselves, an’ if they was a fight they fixed it

³¹ This vision of agrarian diminution as desirable is also evident in the environmental and food movements of the 1970s. Eco-critic Wendell Berry in particular articulates this position in his essays “Think Little” and “People, Land and Community.” Berry identifies gardening as a “personal involvement in the cure of the environment,” and, in an echo of Tom Joad’s small-scale agrarian dream, argues that “questions about farming become inseparable from questions about propriety of scale. A farm can be too big for a farmer to husband properly” (187).

³² Jefferson’s admiration for the agrarian and distrust of the urban is famously pithy: “The mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body.”

themselves; and they wasn't no cops wagglin' their guns, but they was better order than them cops ever give." This is the political valence of Tom's pastoral refuge. Here, political subjectivity corresponds with agrarian independence. The result of this pastoral, economic and political model of asylum is clear: "All work together for our own thing," Tom Joad says, "all farm our own lan'." In other texts of the Dust Bowl, ownership is not such an unambiguous guarantor of subjectivity. In Woody Guthrie's 'This Land is Your Land,' a text which will be discussed later in this chapter, private property is destructive of refuge and asylum is represented as explicitly and radically communitarian. But in Steinbeck's novel, "our own lan'" is an essential element of Tom Joad's vision of expansionist refuge.

Yet the status of this central theory of asylum is unexpectedly provisional. Significantly, Tom's final vision is conditional – it hinges entirely on Casy's claim that all humanity is connected. As Tom says to his mother, "*maybe* like Casy says, a fella ain't got a soul of his own, but on'y a piece of a big one" (572, italics mine). Tom returns to this qualification in the midst of his most famous speech, when he interrupts himself with "if Casy knowed" before declaring his vision of asylum (572).³³ These qualifications are key. Before them, Tom declares his presence only in the midst of the inescapable oppression of hunger and police brutality. It is only after Tom anxiously imposes this limitation on his vision that the dream of asylum is spoken. This rhetorical construction implies that the novel's vision of asylum is wholly dependent upon what Casy "knowed." Without it, Tom is present solely in moments of oppression and labour strife. Even imaginatively, Tom can only transcend his current circumstances if Casy's philosophy is right. Tom describes Casy's vision of communality to his mother:

³³ Critics have consistently acknowledged the centrality of Casy's vision to *The Grapes of Wrath*. Jim Casy, a Christ figure whose initials -- 'JC' -- are regularly commented upon by critics, is frequently read as a spiritual visionary. Emersonian in his vision of the union of humanity and nature -- particularly as evidenced in his dream of a shared soul -- Casy is an unorthodox and yet uniquely American minister. Richard Astro and Frederick I. Carpenter are early proponents of this reading of Casy as the embodiment of an American intellectual and spiritual tradition. Woody Guthrie, whose folk song 'This Land is Your Land' is discussed later in this chapter, also saw Casy's vision as key to Steinbeck's novel. When Guthrie wrote 'Tom Joad' -- a song inspired by both the novel and the film -- he said about the tune, "the people back in Oklahoma haven't got two bucks to buy the book, or even thirty-five cents to see the movie, but the song will get to them and tell them what Preacher Casy said" (Parini 316).

[Casy] says one time he went out in the wilderness to find his own soul, an' he found he didn' have no soul that was his'n. Says he foun' he jus' got a little piece of a great big soul. Says a wilderness ain't no good, 'cause his little piece of a soul wasn't no good 'less it was with the rest, an' was whole. Funny how I remember. Didn' think I was even listenin'. But now I know a fella ain't no good alone. (570)

Tom's vision is based on this philosophy of collectivity. But perhaps more consequential than the particular content of what Casy "knewed" is the existence of the condition itself. For Casy's philosophy hedges the novel's vision of asylum. Because of its provisional status, Tom's dream of sanctuary is a fantasy – an imaginative vision whose stitchwork is showing. And the fantasy is not seamless and indistinguishable from reality, but clearly handmade, a constructed thing whose purchase on reality is insecure. Tom's insertion of the conditional, the 'if' of his dream, in the middle of his narrative, is an interruption, but also a transparency, a revelation of the mechanical workings of the dream – it irresistibly and anxiously reveals itself to be not reality. When excerpted, as they so often are in film montages, Tom's words ring with certitude and prophecy. But this is only true when they have been edited of their tentativeness and qualification. Tom's vision is in fact provisional, not dogmatic; a wish rather than a promise. And indeed this vision of asylum remains unrealized in *The Grapes of Wrath*: the Joads never find the Jeffersonian community Tom imagines. Instead, the vision falters. The Joads cannot stay in the camp and instead move back into California and an uncertain future.

Like the gap between 'America' and 'California,' Tom's qualification of Casy's vision is indicative of the nature of refuge. Asylum exists in both concrete and ideal instantiations. That is, the Dust Bowl refugees experience material asylum in Weedpatch, but Tom Joad's Jeffersonian idyll is an imagined refuge. The *dream* of refuge is distinct from the *reality* of asylum; while Weedpatch is not the dream, and must fail, Tom Joad's vision of agrarian refuge endures, even as it is unrealized. In the imaginary register, asylum is permanent – it is the definitive destination. For Emma Lazarus in 'The New Colossus,' asylum is America itself. Inscribed on the Statue of Liberty's pedestal, the poem denotes the attainment of asylum: Lazarus's extravagant vision of American refuge

marks the end of the journey for “the homeless, tempest-tost” (13). Lady Liberty’s torch and Lazarus’s words are the paired image and text which constitute the end of the journey to America. In this imaginary instantiation, reaching American soil is equivalent to the achievement of perfect asylum. Tom Joad’s dream of a Jeffersonian community similarly exemplifies refuge’s imaginary instantiation. His fantasy society is decidedly not provisional: he does not imagine an agrarian refuge limited by time or scope. Instead, his dream of building “somethin’ like [Weedpatch] all over” is ideal and therefore permanent. Significantly, then, while in the material instantiation of asylum, refuge falters and does not endure, in its imaginary instantiation, asylum is permanent and conclusive: it is where the story ends. Yet the two registers are not wholly distinct; indeed, the material and imaginary instantiations of asylum inform one another. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, it is the memory of Weedpatch that sparks Tom Joad’s dream of permanent agrarian refuge.

Even as Tom Joad envisions the imaginary instantiation of asylum, material refuge falters in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Indeed, it is immediately after the camp dance and the residents’ successful defeat of the state police incursion that the Joads leave Weedpatch. Even this effective defense of the perimeter cannot render the camp permanent material asylum. Ma Joad urges the men to remember that their children are hungry – despite the camp’s protections, the adults cannot find work and the children continue to starve. Steinbeck emphasizes that the problem in California is not a lack of food: in one of the novel’s most famous passages, an inter-chapter vividly describes burning fruit. Piles of oranges are soaked in kerosene and lit on fire in order to keep prices high, while the starving watch the conflagration: “A million people hungry, needing the fruit – and the kerosene sprayed over the golden mountains. And the smell of rot fills the country” (476-7). At the same time, small, independent farmers leave their fruit to rot in the orchards as they cannot afford to harvest it: “The decay spreads over the State, and the sweet smell is a great sorrow on the land” (476). And yet despite these high levels of production, the Joads go hungry, even in the government camp. After a month in Weedpatch, Ma Joad forces the issue of leaving. She reminds the men that Tom has worked only five days since arriving in Weedpatch, the family is out of money and almost out of food. The men resist leaving the camp to look elsewhere for work. Pa

says, “We didn’ want go. It’s nice here, an’ folks is nice here. We’re feared we’ll have to go live in one a them Hoovervilles...This here hot water an’ toilets...” (479). But Ma insists, saying “First thing is, we got to eat...we can’t eat no toilets” (479).³⁴ All the food they have left, Ma says, is “one day’ more grease an’ two days’ flour, an’ ten potatoes” (478). The family decides to head north, following a rumour promising work picking cotton.³⁵

It seems here that asylum falters: even Weedpatch cannot provide enough food for the hungry migrants. But although Ma insists that lack of food is the reason for the family’s departure, this explanation is contradicted by a telling exchange the Joads witnessed upon first arriving in Weedpatch. On the Joads’ first day in the government camp, the head of the residents’ committee admonishes a mother for allowing her children to eat unripe grapes. Jessie asserts that no one goes hungry in Weedpatch: “‘You ain’t got the right to let your girls git hungry in this here camp.’...Jessie turned in anger on the committee. ‘She got no right to be stiff-necked. She got no right, not with our own people’” (431-2). Immediately following this exchange, Jessie sends the family to buy food in the camp store on credit. Why this option is not available to the Joads is never made clear. Without the explanation of lack of food, then, the Joads’ departure is puzzling. Indeed, it is so abrupt, and occurs with so little narrative preparation, that it is potentially nonsensical. The reader is left to wonder why the family must leave the camp -- particularly as their departure follows immediately on the heels of the successful expulsion of state police during the camp dance. As soon as asylum’s inviolable border is established, then, the text ejects the Joads from this sanctuary. The family’s move, following directly on the heels of the dance sequence, implies that despite its inviolable

³⁴ *The Grapes of Wrath* ends in flood, as a swollen river drives the Joads from the refuge they sought in an abandoned boxcar. Driven from even this faint echo of the possibility of progression, the remaining family members squat in a barn. As they trespass in temporary shelter, the rain continues to fall. Thus the Joads begin in drought and end in flood, and still find no permanent asylum.

³⁵ Certainly real migrants – rather than Steinbeck’s fictional Joads – also encountered the limits of the camps’ support system. Benson notes that although the camps and their resident associations could provide short-term help, when families were out of work for extended periods of time, the camp director sought aid from a government agency. However, residents often did not qualify or indeed declined to even apply for such support: “The campers would refuse to avail themselves of food or even medicine offered to them free by the government if they had any choice at all in the matter” (176).

border, refuge must also be impermanent. The refugees cannot remain in Weedpatch, and asylum is revealed as inherently provisional. Refuge is not, as the imaginary instantiation of asylum suggests, where the text ends, but rather an interlude. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, this provisional nature of asylum can be accomplished only by working against Weedpatch's own carefully established logic. In Steinbeck's novel, then, asylum's interludic nature exists *despite*, and not *because of*, the story itself. Indeed, at times, it is obeyed with such fidelity as to be narratively awkward. Thus despite the novel's insistence on the importance of the zone of exception, the Joads leave Weedpatch in search of work, leave America for California because the New Deal camp does not constitute permanent asylum. Refuge is thus revealed as both essential and provisional. The solution proffered by the novel is conceptual, and Tom's vision of an expanded Weedpatch remains an idealized vision, not material refuge. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the dream of sanctuary is subjugated by the national narrative of self-reliance. The primacy of independent agency overcomes the need for refuge, and asylum remains impermanent in Steinbeck's novel.

From Weedpatch to Yellowstone: Shifting Asylum

They stood on a mountain and they looked to the west,
 And it looked like the promised land.
 That bright green valley with a river running through,
 There was work for every single hand, they thought,
 There was work for every single hand.

--Woody Guthrie, 'Tom Joad'

The contemporary cultural influence of *The Grapes of Wrath* was remarkable, and 'the Joads' quickly became shorthand for all of America's migrant labourers. In one notable example of the novel's impact, Farm Security Administration president Rexford Tugwell gave a March 1940 radio address entitled 'What Should America do for the Joads?' In this program, Tugwell asserts that the disaster of the Dust Bowl was entirely unnatural, and not the responsibility of the Exodusters:

[T]he punishment was not to be borne by these folk alone. A nation, a society, had approved this dreadful enterprise. Every man had been led to think that he had a kind of right to a homestead on which he might do what he liked with his own. A free man on free acreage – that the nation believed in as it believed in little else.

Embedded in this commentary on the Dust Bowl is a trenchant critique of the American frontier ethic -- and of Tom Joad's vision of agrarian refuge. In this radio address the New Deal administrator doesn't indict individual farmers, or even industrial agriculture, but a national narrative. Invoking America's civic religion, Tugwell describes the frontier ethic not merely as agricultural policy or regional tradition, but as an article of faith: "the nation believed in it as it believed in little else." And what the nation believed in was the divinely ordained mission of Manifest Destiny to expand the nation -- and therefore civilization -- westward. Tugwell articulates this dream as "a homestead on which [every man] might do what he liked with his own. A free man on free acreage." This explicit association of liberty and territory, of independence and private property is key. As Tugwell implies, and as Tom Joad's vision of "our own lan'" suggests, in the frontier ethic private property and liberty are conflated. Liberty comes to mean freedom to do exactly as one wishes with private property, and it is this radical autonomy -- the conception of the Great Plains as millions of individual lots and not as a whole -- which Tugwell identifies as a catastrophic national ethos. American individualism is indicted here as literally disastrous: it is the ideology which causes the Dust Bowl.

This critique is consequential: Tugwell's assessment renders natural disaster decidedly unnatural. He depicts the drought not as an act of God, but as an inevitability. It wasn't bad luck that turned the Great Plains to dust, he suggests, but American ideology and American ploughs. Highly critical of the 1920s cultivation of Great Plains, and the resulting exposure of topsoil to wind and drought, Tugwell declares it "criminal carelessness" to "transfer eastern [farming] practices to the west." In the Dust Bowl, Tugwell asserts, America reaped exactly what it sowed. And this insistence on shared culpability also constitutes the philosophical framework for the government camps. Weedpatch must exist, Tugwell argues, precisely because "the punishment was not to be

borne by these folks alone.” This is an overt rejection of the discourse of rugged individualism, which typically identifies lazy Okies and bad luck as the reasons for the Dirty '30s.³⁶ And while Tugwell unambiguously accepts asylum as a communal duty here, other government officials in other disasters resist this rhetoric of obligation. As will be discussed in the next chapter, during the Great Mississippi Flood, relief committee chairman Herbert Hoover and President Calvin Coolidge articulate very different models of refuge. Indeed, Tugwell's fundamental assertion that ideology produces catastrophe is forcefully contested by the administrators of the 1927 flood, who read disaster as decidedly natural and inevitable.

Having indicted the frontier ethic, Tugwell does not abandon meta-narrative in answering the question 'What Should America do for the Joads?' Instead, he turns to another national story of another promised land to re-frame American asylum:

[F]or those who live miserably on ditch banks or more luckily in the federal camps, the dews have gone up and disclosed a small round thing, so small as hoarfrost on the ground. There has been manna. A kind government representing the conscience of a nation could do no less than to acknowledge the commonness of fault. This is only just.

Here Tugwell equates refuge with manna, the sustenance God provides to the Hebrews during their journey through the desert. This metaphor comes from the Book of Exodus,

³⁶ President Herbert Hoover coined the phrase “rugged individualism” during the 1928 presidential campaign. In a speech urging Americans to reject the necessary yet paternalistic state-run economy of the First World War, Hoover acknowledged that state control of manufacturing, production and distribution is essential in wartime, but argued that the continuation of such policies in peacetime would destroy the unique American character. America, he believed, was not fundamentally socialist and paternalistic like Europe, but essentially and uniquely individualistic. Hoover argued that continued federal manipulation of the economy would constitute an end to self-government and a betrayal of the founders’ aims. Thus, he asserted, government should be an umpire rather than a player in the nation’s economy. Liberalism is threatened by greater government, not enabled by it. But the President was also careful to assure citizens that government still played a vital role in American life. The nation was not unreservedly laissez-faire, as to be so would be to prevent equality. Instead, Hoover confined his call for government exclusion to the economy.

which tells of manna the size of hoarfrost appearing with the dew each morning.³⁷ The Hebrews survived on manna for forty years, until they reached the borders of Canaan. After crossing into the promised land, the manna ceased to appear.³⁸ Thus manna is explicitly the food of exile: it is consumed only when the Hebrews, and their descendants the Exodusters, wander in strange lands. And, significantly, it is exile in the desert which Tugwell invokes in his radio address. It is not the narrative's conclusion in promised land, and the longed-for end of exodus which the FSA president cites here. Instead, the radio address highlights the Israelites' dispossession. In 1940, when Tugwell addresses the nation, much of the Great Plains remained drought-stricken. The Great Depression had not yet abated, and the need for asylum was still pressing. America had not yet reached the Promised Land. By invoking the story of Exodus, Tugwell elevates both refuge and refugee. He compares the Okies to the Israelites, and Weedpatch to manna; asylum, in this inter-textual moment, is divinely -- or federally -- ordained. Tugwell's allusion to Exodus links the migrant farmers with God's chosen people, but also neatly places the New Deal administration in the role of God, deliverer of manna. Asylum here is rendered a godly task. This deployment of Exodus and not the frontier ethic as the structuring narrative of the Dust Bowl re-frames asylees as righteous and the provision of asylum as "only just."

Although Tugwell depicts the Joads -- and by extension the culpable nation -- as exiles, he does not leave the refugees wandering in the desert. Instead, by the end of the radio address he leads America back to asylum: out of the barren Great Plains and into a balanced relationship with nature through conservation:

The specific terms of humanity's contract with nature can be discovered only by adventure, by experiment and by pioneering. These Joads were the victim of an attempt at the enlargement of man's kingdom which failed. Somehow their

³⁷ Tugwell's language here is drawn directly from scripture. Exodus 16:14 reads, "And when the dew that lay had gone up, behold, upon the face of the wilderness there lay a small round thing, as small as the hoarfrost on the ground."

³⁸ There is rabbinical disagreement as to exactly when the Hebrews stopped receiving manna. While some scholars argue that the bounty ceased as soon as Canaan's border was crossed, others assert that the manna continued to appear for several more years.

distress must be relieved. To an extent it was, and already man has returned to the attack, not this time by risking the tender flesh of unready pioneers, but rather, by sending out the advance parties of scientific conservation.

The battle to discover "humanity's contract with nature" requires a certain amount of risk, and it is clearly a campaign which Tugwell is not yet willing to abandon. To continue the battlefield metaphor, in the war to enlarge humanity's kingdom, only the front of farming the Great Plains is lost. The war continues, but instead of sacrificing the "tender flesh" of the farmers, the nation will send out advance parties of scientific conservation.³⁹ Tugwell asserts that with the right weapons – namely conservation, or the responsible stewardship of agricultural lands – the war with nature can be won. For Tugwell, then, conservation constitutes a kind of anticipatory asylum – one which will hopefully prevent dispossession and the need for migrant labour camps. This return to the land echoes Tom Joad's concluding vision of refuge. After wandering through the desert of the Great Plains, and finding sanctuary in Weedpatch, Tom dreams of an independent agrarian asylum. And although his radio address is entitled 'What Should America do for the Joads,' Tugwell is preoccupied by the land as well as by its refugees. In his indictment of the frontier ethic, both the grasslands and its farmers are in need of sanctuary. This depiction of the American landscape as both refuge and refugee is echoed in another kind of asylum which also flourished in the 1930s – the National Park Service (NPS). And just as conservation figures prominently in 'What Should America do for the Joads,' so too is it the dominant discourse of America's national parks. During the era of the migrant labour camps, the NPS experienced unprecedented growth; some labour camps were even established inside national parks and forests. As forms of asylum, national parks and migrant labour camps are conceptually similar. Like such camps, parks are often conceived of as places of sanctuary, and are defined by refuge's characteristic inviolability: "Since the Garden of Eden, the park has been depicted as a special place set aside from civilization, a bordered and distinct zone. Millions of vacationers have prized

³⁹ Tugwell sees the Great Plains sharecroppers as cannon fodder in this ill-planned skirmish with Nature, and this militarized language transforms the migrant farmers into fallen warriors, not simply despised and dispossessed Okies. He also describes them as "pioneers," harkening back to iconic figures in American history. As with the comparison to the Israelites, Tugwell here again elevates the migrant workers by comparison.

the park for this very concept of separation – valuing the landscape as a mythic escape from reality and everyday burdens” (Jones and Wills 171). National parks are thus defined by their separateness: they are definitively not what lies outside Yellowstone or the Grand Tetons. They are also explicitly concerned with both conservation and preservation, and consist of a zone of exception in which development, industry and urban expansion are curtailed. Like migrant labour camps, such zones attempt to protect through enclosure; wildlife and ecosystems are sheltered through the establishment and strict maintenance of borders.

The expansionist impulse of Tom Joad’s vision of asylum in *The Grapes of Wrath* is also shared by national parks. Like the government camps, national parks strain against the very borders which define them. Contemporary ecologist David Harmon acknowledges the simultaneous inadequacy and necessity of a national park system: “For conservationists, a primary challenge in the century to come will be finding ways of integrating all kinds of protected areas into the wider matrix of seminatural, agricultural, and urban lands – in other words, to extend the ethic of caring that many people feel about parks to the places where they earn their living” (Harmon 13). Here again, asylum’s essential border is ultimately insufficient. While preservation is entirely dependent upon an inviolable perimeter, Harmon seeks to extend the park’s border almost infinitely. He desires not an enclosed space but a mindset – “an ethic of caring,” which renders virtually every landscape a national park. Like Tom Joad’s theory of refuge, this is an inherently expansionist view of asylum – one which seeks to expropriate not a region of the Grand Tetons but the mind of the park visitor. Thus like migrant labour camps, national parks are also spaces of refuge which complicate the boundaries of the inviolable space. As park literature of the 1930s reveals -- and in marked contrast to Tom Joad’s vision of a small-scale agrarian ideal -- when faced with encroachment, the NPS extended its borders by imaginatively colonizing the external world.

A History of the American National Park:

American writer Wallace Stegner famously referred to national parks as “the best idea we ever had” (137). Indeed, national parks are a uniquely American invention; while pastoral spaces such as gardens and hunting grounds have existed for centuries, the notion of public access to protected wilderness is a New World innovation.⁴⁰ Earlier spaces were either one or the other, public or wild: the king’s hunting grounds, for instance, were wilderness, and protected not only forests and groves but wildlife as well – solely for the purpose of the hunt, of course. However, access to the monarch’s lands was restricted, and poaching was severely punished. City parks, in contrast, were accessible but carefully manicured. Intended to provide refuge from the pressures and congestion of city life, urban spaces such as the Boston Common were open to the public but definitively not wild. Nevertheless, Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux’s Central Park – a meticulously composed work of landscape architecture – was a clear precursor to the democratic National Park Service: “Public parks...had been bequeathed to European cities as remnants of aristocratic privilege; but Central Park became what Calvin Vaux described in 1865 as ‘the big art work of the Republic’” (Carr 18). Central Park was thus understood by its designers as an explicitly national project -- one that embodied the virtues of the American republic. Roderick Nash notes that until the establishment of Yellowstone in 1872, park was synonymous with garden – carefully groomed pastoral and arcadian spaces which were the antithesis of wilderness, and emphasized humanity’s control over nature (728). In contrast to this garden tradition, in the American national park system, nature was not cultivated in order to present its most pleasing aspect. In this sense, the NPS differs markedly from the European garden tradition of Versailles, in which elaborately manicured grounds eschew realism and instead emphasise nature as ornamentation.⁴¹ Ostensibly shying away from such

⁴⁰ There is virtual critical unanimity on this issue. See Jones and Willis (64-5); Nash “American Invention” (726-7); Worster (261); and Runte (1).

⁴¹ The extent to which America’s national parks are truly pristine wilderness is highly contested. Clearly, even the introduction of basic infrastructure necessary for public access alters the landscape. Since the 1960s, park advocates and rangers have increasingly called for a policy of minimum intervention, both in search of some kind of originary purity and in order to protect wildlife. These originalist arguments invoke a narrative of an authentic untouched American self – one which views human intervention with suspicion,

interference in the wilderness, American national parks celebrate not design but nature, and in doing so foster suspicion of artifice, and perhaps even of human intervention.

Once the American innovation – wilderness parks administered by the government for the benefit of all citizens – was established, the question of what exactly the park is intended to protect emerged.⁴² The first recorded call for a national park is generally attributed to artist George Catlin. In 1832, while visiting North Dakota, Catlin lamented the encroaching urbanization and industrialization which threatened the prairie, Native American culture and the bison. He imagined instead “a nation’s park, containing man and beast, in all the wild and freshness of their nature’s beauty!” This early conception then, envisioned the protection not only of natural wonders, but wildlife as well as Native Americans. For Catlin, as for many of his contemporaries, such an enclosure was an explicitly nationalist project. The “nation’s park” would be “a beautiful and thrilling specimen...for America to preserve and hold up to the view of her refined citizens and the world, in future ages!” (Catlin 262). The national park, then, came to embody American cultural identity, a particularly important task given the absence of great national achievement in the arts, sciences and politics.⁴³ In place of such a national record, “the reliance on nature as proof of national greatness” emerged as definitively American: “The agelessness of monumental scenery instead of the past accomplishments of Western Civilization was to become the visible symbol of continuity and stability in the new nation” (Runte 14, 12). The discovery of natural wonders of course entrenched the perception of America as God’s chosen land, particularly set apart for His favour – the city on a hill. As Americans boasted, Europeans might have the cathedral at Chartres, but the young republic boasted the Grand Canyon, wrought not by human hands but made by God himself. National parks thus legitimated America as a nation with a past, a

as a defiling influence. This debate also echoes the American narrative of tension between the clearing and the wilderness.

⁴² Runte traces the mindsets which influence the NPS, from cultural identity to monumentalism to complete conservation. He argues that the contemporary notion of environmentalism was completely absent from the early days of the NPS.

⁴³ The national parks' role as representative of American cultural identity is a matter of critical agreement. See Runte's *National Parks: The American Experience*; Nash's "The American Invention of National Parks" and *Wilderness and the American Mind*; and Carr's *Wilderness by Design*.

cultural legacy, and not simply a gawky teenager in the company of sophisticated European adults – the “refined citizens” of George Catlin’s original vision.⁴⁴

The question of exactly what the national parks are intended to preserve has long been a matter of debate. The Yosemite Act of 1864 -- the first legislation establishing a national park -- attempts to define the issue clearly. It states that “the premises shall be held for public use, resort, and recreation; and shall be inalienable for all time” (11). However, what precisely is deemed to be in need of such “inalienable” status has shifted over time. Given the symbolic power of the American landscape, it is not surprising that the dramatic and definitively American scenery of the West was the first terrain designated a national park. Landscapes of spectacular oddity were highly valued; in the early days of landscape preservation, national parks were originally established to protect natural wonders, not endangered but quotidian ecosystems. Thus the National Park Service initially sought to protect the breathtaking expanse of the Grand Canyon and the Rocky Mountains, the Sierra Nevada and the stunning Yosemite Falls. In the nineteenth century, parks existed to protect and preserve America’s wonders, curiosities and exceptions. The NPS was thus essentially a Victorian curio cabinet writ large. National parks were geological freak shows, informed by the same mindset that influenced the midway at the world’s fairs. And an essential aspect of their freakishness was scale: the sheer size of Old Faithful and California’s redwood trees lends America’s landscape a kind of somber monumentalism. Here American exceptionalism is rendered powerfully material, and nature’s wondrous exceptions are first encircled with legislation in Yosemite (1864) and Yellowstone (1872).⁴⁵ In the nineteenth century, the commonplace in nature was not yet deemed worthy of protection. Designed to protect the spectacular, park borders were drawn to enclose natural wonders and not to accommodate migration patterns, natural habitats, or even endangered species. The purpose of the park was

⁴⁴ The westward expansion of the 1840s delivered much of the geographic grandeur of the continent into American hands, including the Grand Canyon, Yosemite, Yellowstone and the Grand Tetons.

⁴⁵ Hot Springs, Arkansas was the first such protected zone, although it was incorporated in 1832 not as a natural wonder but as a site for medicinal cures. Like Yellowstone and Yosemite, Hot Springs was not identified as a ‘national park’ – this term was not in circulation until the 1880s. Until then, such spaces were referred to as ‘public parks’ (Runte 42).

“strictly scenic...monumentalism, not environmentalism, was the driving force” (Runte 29).

In contrast, the modern philosophy of complete conservation asserts that entire ecosystems must be protected and maintained in as natural a state as possible, without regard to their scenic potential.⁴⁶ Less interested in tourist destinations and dazzling landscapes, contemporary park management calls, for instance, for the establishment of zones to maintain migratory patterns. This approach also asserts that when logging is permitted to the very edges of Sequoia National Park, the trees inside the park are endangered by soil erosion and the removal of the watershed.⁴⁷ This philosophy of complete conservation renders borders more complex than the enclosure of natural wonders. And it raises questions about how widely the space of asylum must be drawn. The tension between conservation and use value is inherent in the park agency's founding document. In 1916 the NPS was created, gathering existing parks under a single agency, and the ‘Act to Establish a National Park Service’ articulates the purpose of the system. The legislation declares that national parks exist in order “to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations” (Dilsaver 46). Thus the seed of the conflict between

⁴⁶ The 1934 dedication of the Everglades National Park is recognized as the first victory of complete conservation over monumentalism. The Florida park has no single scenic spectacle, and was intended as the first in a series of single ecosystem parks. However, attempts to establish a sweep of redwood country from Oregon to Southern California were stymied in the 1960s (Runte). George Wright’s 1932 report ‘Fauna of the National Parks of the United States’ is the most influential example of this research-based resource management. A visionary work on wildlife management, the report urges the NPS to value not simply monumental scenery but what is now referred to as complete conservation. The report argues that national park borders are established solely to contain dazzling scenery and without any consideration of plants and animals, and that such disregard of “self-contained biological units” is gravely damaging to local ecosystems (37-9). Wright’s report was influential for a few years in the 1930s, but then shelved. Complete conservation did not become a central part of NPS policy until the 1960s.

⁴⁷ There is an extensive and highly controversial history of the opening of national park lands to industry, from the earliest construction of hotels in Yosemite to Alaskan drilling. James Watt, Secretary of the Interior under President Ronald Reagan from 1981-83, is among the most infamous proponents of total accessibility. Watt aggressively campaigned for the opening of parklands to industry, and in doing so earned the wrath of environmentalists. He once declared that the goal of the Interior in bald terms: “We will mine more, drill more, cut more timber” (Wolf 65). However, some critics argue that the problem is more complex than simply shutting down park borders. Runte argues that the national parks exist as they do precisely because of economic interests (139). Park boundaries, he suggests, are established according to the valuable commodities they exclude.

use and preservation, which was to perpetually plague the national parks, is planted in its originating documents.

Despite the Great Depression, the National Park Service experienced unprecedented expansion in the 1930s:

The economic crisis actually spawned the greatest boom in construction of visitor facilities, road and trail development, park planning, identification of new areas, and new initiatives for expansion of the system to ever occur... Hundreds of miles of roads and trails opened hitherto wild backcountry and thousands of structures, from museums to employee houses and campground comfort stations, appeared across the system (Dilsaver 111).

This feverish expansion was largely due to New Deal employment programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and Public Works Administration (PWA), which put thousands of unemployed men to work on infrastructure projects.⁴⁸ The impact on America's parks was significant; from 1933 to 1942, "the CCC constructed more infrastructure in the parks than in the entire history of the system to that time" (Dilsaver 111).⁴⁹ The project served a double purpose of employment and expansion. As Salmond notes, the CCC "brought together two wasted resources, the young men and the land, in an attempt to save both." President Roosevelt echoed this double bottom line in a radio address: "In creating this civilian conservation corps we are killing two birds with one stone. We are clearly enhancing the value of our natural resources and second, we are

⁴⁸ As Salmond notes, conservation camps for the unemployed were not a New Deal invention. Such projects already existed, such as the Forest Service program to establish subsistence camps for unemployed men in national forests. The CCC also had international predecessors. Many European nations ran similar projects, the most infamous of which is the German Labor Service, whose authoritarian and militaristic tendencies are linked to Nazism. Often referred to as "soil soldiers" and the "tree army," the CCC was clearly paramilitarized, and not simply a civilian work force.

⁴⁹ The Corps was one of the most successful of all the New Deal initiatives. During its nine years of existence more than 2.5 million young men worked for the CCC (Salmond). In addition to park infrastructure, the Corps also worked on soil erosion projects, flood prevention, reforestation and fire control.

relieving an appreciable amount of actual distress... We are conserving not only our natural resources but our human resources” (4).⁵⁰

However, this double purpose was not without its detractors. National park expansion raised concerns over the loss of pristine wilderness, and the NPS faced criticism that the New Deal programs sacrificed conservation to make-work projects (Edge 137-8). And it was not simply CCC activities but also their very presence which troubled park advocates. Corps workers were housed in temporary camps set up within the national parks, and these encampments, combined with the furious pace of infrastructure expansion, alarmed many conservationists. Rosalie Edge, an early supporter of complete conservation, was one of the many activists who campaigned against CCC presence in national parks.⁵¹ She argued that the double purposes of human and natural refuge were in fact mutually exclusive: “Work relief has entered our National Parks and Forests in force. Each one of these has its C.C.C. camps; and road-building is again the chief employment of the hundreds of men thus introduced into the wilderness. Can anyone suppose that a wilderness and a C.C.C. camp can exist side by side? And can a wilderness contain a highway?” (Edge 138). Here Rosalie Edge eloquently articulates the problem of expanding national parks. She asserts that asylum is inherently competitive: access by one refugee -- whether unemployed Americans or the national landscape -- endangers the other. This tension between use and preservation -- between the clearing and the wilderness -- is reflected in both past and contemporary debates over

⁵⁰ Note that this double bottom line was not universally embraced. In addition to the protests of park staff and advocates, the American Federation of Labor vigorously attacked Roosevelt’s suggestion that CCC workers be paid \$30 per month. The AFL argued that such low pay would reduce general wage standards. The administration replied that the labourers were fed, clothed and housed in addition to their dollar a day wage. The AFL also objected that the CCC essentially militarized the American labor force, thus reducing working people’s bargaining powers at a crucial historical moment.

⁵¹ Rosalie Edge was an influential activist. In 1929 she established the Emergency Conservation Corps, which was unusual for its time in that it aimed to preserve many species of birds and animals which were not yet endangered -- specifically in order to prevent their eventual extinction. A committed advocate, Edge did not seek to protect only those species which were beautiful or valuable, but instead saw the preservation of every animal and bird as essential. Edge also founded the Hawk Mountain Sanctuary in Pennsylvania, ending decades of eagle and hawk shooting and establishing a refuge that eventually grew to more than 2,000 acres.

the very purpose of the NPS.⁵² And it points to the limits of refuge itself. Implicit in the tension between a wilderness and a highway is the possibility that sanctuary is not only sheltering, but also perilous. Rosalie Edge points to this prospect when she suggests that providing a safe haven for CCC workers endangers Yellowstone. The unsettling notion that asylum can imperil emerges most clearly in the texts of Hurricane Katrina, and will be discussed in a later chapter. But in the texts of the NPS, the debate over what asylum should protect serves primarily as rhetorical cover for the vulnerability of refuge itself.

Asylum's relentless threat:

In another departure from modern park policy, for much of the early twentieth century recreation was not one of the primary purposes of the National Park Service.⁵³ In these years, education and inspiration were the essential tasks of the park system. In a 1936 address to his fellow park administrators, John R. White, Superintendent of Sequoia National Park, stresses the importance of the camp's atmosphere.⁵⁴ White's speech reflects the religious overtones as well as the inspirational and educational approach of the early NPS, and typifies what one critic describes as a "holistic approach to the environment that considered entire visual and experiential scenes and the inspiration they

⁵² Despite such objections to their presence in the NPS, the CCC remained a popular New Deal project, and often appeared in film reels touting the economic recovery effort. This appeal may have been due to the project's evocation of American mythology. As Salmond notes, the CCC "appealed to one of the most durable of American folkways, the mystique of the forest. In an age of rapid urbanization, the CCC boys made one think of the frontier... the boys re-created the spirit of an heroic age now past." What Salmond calls "the unique, almost pioneer, flavor of the whole CCC enterprise" was an essential aspect of the program's success .

⁵³ George Wright's 1932 report 'Fauna of the National Parks of the United States' is the most influential example of this new interest in research-based resource management. A visionary work on wildlife management, the report urges the NPS to value not simply monumental scenery but towards the philosophy of what is now known as 'complete conservation.' The report argues that national park borders are established solely to contain dazzling scenery and without any consideration of plants and animals, and that such disregard of "self-contained biological units" is gravely damaging to local ecosystems (37-9). Wright's report was influential for a few years in the 1930s, but then fell out of fashion. Complete conservation did not become a central part of NPS policy until the 1960s.

⁵⁴ White served two terms as Superintendent of Sequoia, from 1920 to 1938, and 1941 to 1947. He was a committed proponent of limiting development in national parks, and prevented the construction of several proposed roads in Sequoia, including a highway that would have linked the park to Yosemite.

provided as the highest preservation targets” (Dilsaver 112).⁵⁵ White emphasises the importance of the park's 'atmosphere,' and in his comments on appropriate entertainment for park visitors, identifies many threats to this somewhat nebulous concept:

The entertainment should be refined in its best sense, and so far as possible along natural history lines and explanatory of the park....[radio] use must be carefully regulated to avoid jazz programs and any blaring forth that is improper...The violin and flute with perhaps the cornet are the best instruments for campfire use, with, of course, the piano...Electric lighting is such an accepted utility that at first it seems necessary everywhere in public or operator areas. Yet nothing conduces so much to a quiet park atmosphere as general darkness except in and near buildings...We are much less anxious about the damage that may be done by CCC work to park physical values than the damage that may be done to moral values. It is easy to protect park trees or rocks; it is less easy to protect park atmosphere. (White 147-8)

Superintendent White, then, is not primarily concerned with the hazards identified by Rosalie Edge in her 1936 comments on the CCC presence in national parks. Edge fears the damage done by the New Deal work force to “park physical values,” and asks evocatively, "can a wilderness contain a highway?" Superintendent White is wary of a more nebulous, less material danger. For White, inviolable borders are easily accomplished. He asserts that the redwood forests and the Grand Canyon -- what he calls "trees or rocks" -- can be protected without difficulty, but the "atmosphere" is "less easy to protect." This move from "rocks or trees" to "atmosphere" is an expansionist gesture, and one that echoes Tom Joad's vision in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Like Steinbeck's novel, in which Weedpatch is expanded to "all over" and Tom himself will be found

⁵⁵ It was Frederick Law Olmsted who first articulated this approach: “In his 1865 report to the governor of California, [Olmsted] laid the philosophical foundations of preservation for inspirational purposes” (Dilsaver 9). And the ‘atmosphere’ approach to national parks endures; in a recent collection of critical essays on the non-economic and recreation value of parks, Allen D. Putney argues that parks are valuable not only as ecosystems but are also “primal landscapes of the Creation that deeply touch the spiritual, cultural, aesthetic, and relational dimensions of human existence. These are fundamental aspects of the human spirit that inspire and move, that trigger responses of awe, appreciation, and, for the keen observer, the understanding that all is related...It is the profound, personal, gut-level knowing of oneness that causes individuals and communities to act to seek harmony with the environment and with the rest of humanity” (Putney in Harmon 3-4).

"ever'where," White's address expands the scope of asylum from the material to the conceptual. But the Superintendent's offhand, even nonchalant assertion also constitutes a remarkable shift. Indeed, White's contention that the natural world is easy to protect flies in the face of earlier park advocacy. The Superintendent declares that "it is easy to protect trees or rocks," the same physical features once deemed so vulnerable, and the protection of which was so essential to American identity. This re-calibration of vulnerability is significant; White renders the protection of nature effortless in order to raise the value of the atmosphere. In the arithmetic of protected spaces, then, that which is most vulnerable is most valuable. Like all forms of asylum, national parks are acts of preservation. They exist only because of perceived threat. As one critic notes, without the creeping incursion of 'civilization,' which threatened to turn the fabled frontier into another East Coast, the National Park Service would never have been born. In Roderick Nash's trenchant observation, "Cities, not log cabins, produce Sierra Clubbers" (728). As White's reflections on the vulnerable 'atmosphere' of national parks demonstrates, the NPS is anxiety extant. Vulnerability must be posited for sanctuary to exist. And this threat must be maintained in perpetuity – once the initial park is established, danger cannot flag lest its contents be deemed too unexceptional, too safe. Earlier park advocates argued that those same "trees or rocks" which White dismisses as easily protected were in fact near extinction and desperately in need of asylum. Frederick Law Olmsted made just such a claim in his 1865 assertion that before the establishment of the NPS, "the sublimity of the Yosemite, and of the stateliness of the neighboring Sequoia grove" – trees and rocks – were under threat:

[T]he danger [is] that such scenes might become private property and through the false taste, the caprice or the requirements of some industrial speculation of their holders, their value to posterity be injured. To secure them against this danger Congress passed an act providing that the premises should be segregated from the general domain of the public lands (12).⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Frederick Law Olmsted's majority report assessment of Yosemite engages in just this rhetoric of necessity. Olmsted argues that the park is not simply a refuge but is literally lifesaving – that visiting a national park improves human health: "It is a scientific fact that the occasional contemplation of natural scenes of an impressive character, particularly if this contemplation occurs in connection with relief from

As the similarity between Olmstead and White's calls to action demonstrate, the rhetoric of peril is highly adaptive. Although the identity of the endangered material shifts, the discourse endures. Despite his radical dismissal of the vulnerability of "trees or rocks," Superintendent White does not abandon the narrative of eternal threat. Instead, he employs the same rhetoric as his predecessors did in their demands for the creation of national parks. Thus the discourse of peril endures even as peril itself alters. For if it does not exclude hostile forces, asylum's perimeter is rendered meaningless. To maintain refuge, Superintendent White's address posits a constant state of vulnerability. Risk, then, is a constitutive element of sanctuary. Thus once the "trees or rocks" -- those definitive elements of a national park -- are safely protected, White identifies another threat -- this one posed by loud music and electric lighting. As long as some aspect of the park continues to face danger, its status as a precarious space endures. Sanctuary is always imagined to be vulnerable. As White notes, eternal watchfulness is essential: "Often the things which adversely affect the atmosphere of a park have small and apparently innocent beginnings; but they may grow along unsuspected lines; so that constant vigilance is needed when any innovation is proposed either by park men or park operators." The atmosphere that Superintendent White so values is endangered by a variety of threats, including movies, radios, souvenir stands, electric lights and winter sports infrastructure. His concern is partly the misuse of such items -- the risk inheres in the mistaken or careless application of electricity and loud music. But the shifting rhetoric of peril and the narrative of regenerating threat suggests that it's not "rocks and trees" or even "atmosphere" which are at risk, but asylum itself. White's anxiety suggests that it is refuge itself which is in need of protection. Implicit in the adaptive discourse of peril is an assertion of asylum's vulnerability -- the contention that sanctuary must be protected by a defensible border. Both White and Olmsted, then, seek to protect parks

ordinary cares, change of air and change of habits, is favorable to the health and vigor of men and especially to the health and vigor of their intellect beyond any other conditions which can be offered them, that it not only gives pleasure for the time being but increases the subsequent capacity for happiness and the means of securing happiness. The want of such occasional recreation...often results in a class of disorders the characteristic quality of which is mental disability, sometimes taking the severe forms of softening of the brain, paralysis, palsy, monomania, or insanity, but more frequently of mental and nervous excitability, moroseness, melancholy or irascibility, incapacitating the subject for the proper exercise of the intellectual and moral forces" (18). This faith in the physically and mentally restorative power of landscape is typical of pastoral discourse, and is deployed here in order to define the American countryside as essential to national health.

from encroachment, and in doing so produce a narrative justifying sanctuary itself. The rhetoric of eternal threat thus ultimately serves to protect refuge rather than the refugee.

While the Superintendent's prohibitions are irresistibly comic, they are more than mere screed against callow modernity. Indeed, White's most salient rhetorical move – the expansion of sanctuary beyond the park's physical borders to the elusive “atmosphere” – highlights a key element of American asylum. As in *The Grapes of Wrath*, White's simultaneous assertion of the perimeter and expansion beyond it is expressed in increasingly conceptual terms. As sanctuary's border expands, the texts shift from the concrete reality of Weedpatch to Tom Joad's unrealized and ephemeral vision of an independent agrarian community, and from enclosing Old Faithful to protecting Superintendent White's insubstantial “atmosphere.” This pattern constitutes not only a shift from containment to expansion, but also from the material to the intangible. Asylum's expansionist trajectory is thus coupled here with an inexorable drive to abstraction. And this pattern is also evident in another American text of the era: Woody Guthrie's 'This Land is Your Land.' Guthrie's enduringly popular folk song will serve as a final example of how asylum's ever-expanding border is accompanied by a concomitant shift beyond that perimeter to the abstract -- from the concrete to theoretical.

Woody Guthrie and the Abstraction of Asylum:

There is a Highway from coast to the coast,
New York to Los Angeles,
I'm a goin' down that Road with Troubles on my mind,
I got them 66 Highway Blues

--Woody Guthrie, '66 Highway Blues'

Like John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, Woody Guthrie's body of work also depicts both the establishment and dismantling of asylum's borders. And this pairing of the two most famous artists of the Dust Bowl is not an arranged marriage, awkwardly stretching

to accommodate a common literary theme. Steinbeck is often referred to as “the Woody Guthrie of American authors,” and Guthrie’s “hard hitting songs” are frequently described as “the soundtrack to Steinbeck.” The two artists knew each other and responded creatively to each other’s work: one of Guthrie’s best-known songs is “Tom Joad,” inspired by the film *The Grapes of Wrath*, and Guthrie claimed that he was asked by the film’s producers to visit the set during filming to perform an authentic migrant worker ballad.⁵⁷ For his part, Steinbeck wrote a laudatory forward for *Hard-Hitting Songs for Hard Hit People* (1967), a seminal collection of protest songs edited by Alan Lomax, Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie. And it was while performing at a ‘Grapes of Wrath evening’ in 1940 to benefit the John Steinbeck Committee for Agricultural Workers that Guthrie met Alan Lomax, the musicologist and folklorist with whom Guthrie recorded many records, and who would do much to promote the songwriter’s career and reputation. Of course, their most obvious commonality is thematic: like Steinbeck, Guthrie was compelled by the suffering of the Dust Bowl and wrote many songs about the disaster, often from the point of view of the migrant worker. This perspective came naturally to the folk singer, who was himself a Dust Bowl refugee. However, it is in his best known song, “This Land is Your Land,” (“This Land”), that Guthrie most closely echoes both Steinbeck’s and the National Park Service’s restless expansion of asylum’s borders.

As many critics have noted, Guthrie’s song is now so familiar as to be an entirely depoliticized, mild expression of pleasant patriotism.⁵⁸ This insipidity is related to the song’s ubiquitousness – it has not only been recorded and performed by myriad and various artists, but also used in advertisements by the Ford Motor Company, United Airlines and the National Wildlife Federation, as the theme song for George McGovern’s

⁵⁷ Woody Guthrie and his wife Marjorie even named one of their sons – Joady Ben – after Tom Joad (Klein 345).

⁵⁸ Guthrie’s contemporaries expressed particular concern at his increasingly meek public image when the Department of the Interior – the government department of the National Parks System – awarded Guthrie the Conservation Service Award. Irwin Silber, a friend, journalist and music writer, fumed “They’re taking a revolutionary, and turning him into a conservationist” (Klein 434). As biographer Joe Klein notes, accolades such as the Department of the Interior award “tended to emphasize Woody’s optimism at the expense of all else” (434).

1972 presidential campaign, and as the tune Alan Lomax chose to be sung by millions of American schoolchildren on the first Music in Our Schools Day (Jackson 43-4, Klein 433, Santelli 50). As Jackson notes, “‘This Land’ has entered the bloodstream of our cultural body” (20). This popularity has at times masked the song’s radical meaning; its placid, even insipid sentimentality is strangely divorced from the songwriter who famously inscribed on his guitar, “This machine kills fascists.” “This Land” has become a song everyone can get behind – boy scouts, elementary school choirs, politicians of every persuasion – and its meaning is so generalized as to be meaningless. Yet Guthrie composed it as a protest against political quietism. The song was written in 1940 as a direct response to Irving Berlin’s “God Bless America,” a tune which Guthrie said was “driving him crazy,” because “it was just another of those songs that told people not to worry, that God was in the driver’s seat” (Klein 136).⁵⁹ The song’s inspiration by Berlin’s tune was originally much more explicit: in its first draft, “This Land” was entitled “God Blessed America,” and the refrain was not the now familiar “This land was made for you and me,” but “God blessed America for you and me” (Jackson 19).⁶⁰ Guthrie was, however, a frequent reviser, and by the time he first recorded “This Land” in the spring of 1944, he had changed the lyric “God blessed America for you and me” to the now familiar refrain (Jackson 31).

The original version also contained two verses which have not achieved canonical status, and still remain relatively unknown:

As I went walking I saw a sign there
 And on the sign it said "No Trespassing."
 But on the other side it didn't say nothing,
 That side was made for you and me.

One bright sunny morning, in the shadow of a steeple;

⁵⁹ Ironically, as David Hajdu notes, Guthrie’s song is now often performed with Berlin’s melody “on albums of patriotic music and in concerts by pop orchestras that accompany the fireworks on the Fourth of July.”

⁶⁰ Although many sources outline the history of “This Land,” including such thorough biographies such as Joe Klein’s *Woody Guthrie: A Life* and Ed Cray’s *Ramblin’ Man: The Life and Times of Woody Guthrie*, Mark Allan Jackson’s *Prophet Singer* provides the most detailed account of the song’s conception, revisions and recording history.

By the relief office, I saw my people --
 As they stood there hungry, I stood there wondering
 Is This Land made for you and me?

Many critics agree that the popular excision of these two verses essentially depoliticizes “This Land.” As Jackson argues, “The omission of these lyrics removes the song’s initial dissenting and questioning voice and leaves behind a praising remnant, one that sounds more like a national anthem than its intended purpose” (21).⁶¹ However, it should be noted that the explicitly political verses were not elided solely by a public desire for uncomplicated Americana, but also by Guthrie himself, who did not always perform the private property and relief office lines.⁶² The song’s complicated recording and release history also contribute to its unsteady content: Guthrie’s original recording of “This Land” does not include the relief office section, and was in any event not released until 1997. When the song was first released in 1951, it was without the two radical verses (Shumway 133). Similarly, although Guthrie used “This Land” as a theme song for a short-lived radio program, the version he performed on the radio excluded both the relief office and private property sections. The song was not in wide print circulation until 1951, when Guthrie published it in a mimeographed booklet which he sold for twenty-five cents. The standard print version of the song now contains the familiar four verses plus the relief office, private property and “freedom highway” stanzas.

In both the canonical and less familiar versions, “This Land” invokes the same landscape imagery as “God Bless America” – Guthrie’s “diamond deserts” and “wheat

⁶¹ One notable dissenter, Shumway, disagrees with the claim that “This Land” can be designated as “patriotic only when it is stripped of its oppositional content” (132). Instead, he insists that even without the explicitly political sections, “this seemingly innocuous celebration of the American landscape is the most radical of all of Guthrie’s songs,” due to its inherent subversion of private property (132).

⁶² The song was recently reassembled in a resonant political moment when Pete Seeger -- who co-edited *Hard-Hitting Songs for Hard Hit People* with Guthrie, and who played with Guthrie in The Almanac Singers in the early 1940s -- Bruce Springsteen and Tao Rodriguez-Seeger performed all the verses at We Are One: The Obama Inaugural Celebration at the Lincoln Memorial in January 2009. Typical of Seeger’s performance ethic, the singers encouraged the audience to sing along, and were backed by a professional chorus. As Brian Hiatt reports in *Rolling Stone* magazine, Springsteen “remembered how Seeger was determined to sing the oft-omitted final verses of ‘This Land is Your Land’... ‘Of course, that’s what Pete’s been doing his whole life. He sings all the verses all the time – especially the ones that we would like to leave out of our history as a people” (14).

fields waving” echo Berlin’s “mountains,” “prairies” and “oceans white with foam.” Indeed such pastoral imagery is Guthrie’s stock in trade. But perhaps no single element of “This Land” is more essential to Guthrie’s lyric imagining of America than the song’s famous ‘you’ and ‘me.’⁶³ This relational model is so familiar as to be invisible; and yet it differs significantly from potential alternate constructions such as “This land was made for everyone” or “for all of us” or “for every American.” “You and me” establishes a relationship between speaker and audience, and when the lyric is sung, “you and me” are transformed from speaker and reader to singer and fellow singers. This transformation may appear to elide the individualized speaker, drowning the singular subject’s voice and consciousness in mass, communal performance. However, “you and “me” are personalized every time “This Land” is sung and the singer becomes the song’s speaker. What emerges instead of an elision of the individual is an emphasis on the relational – on the connection between “you” and “me” rather than on two separate voices singing in unison. Note, for instance, that the land was made not merely for “all” – which would be a declaration of equality, to be sure, but a generalized one. Guthrie instead insists that the land is not made for the faceless many, but for the particularized “you” and “me,” the faces and names of whom shift with every performance. In this way the song insists upon connection, and by its very performance embodies communal identification.

The manner in which “you” and “me” are deployed throughout the song is revealing. The chorus famously begins, “This land is your land, this land is my land” and ends, “This land was made for you and me.” The first line is dominated by the word “land,” which occurs four times in a single phrase. This repetition is conceptually as well as typographically significant; at this opening moment in the song, the relationship between the singer-subjects is entirely mediated by the land. This dominance is established not simply through repetition, but also grammatically, through the possessive pronouns “your” and “my.” Thus the land both syntactically and symbolically mediates

⁶³ This analysis considers the lyric without any reference to the melody – a division which is anathema for some music critics. However, many Guthrie scholars have noted that the folksinger prioritized words over music; Guthrie wrote many more lyrics than melodies, reused old tunes over and over, and his primary musical requirement was that a tune was easy to sing. As Klein notes of Guthrie’s composition style, “[T]he music was usually an afterthought. The words were most important. He wrote his songs at the typewriter; it was the instrument he played best” (96-7).

the relationship between the two singer-subjects; they are not yet “you” and “me,” but instead exist only by virtue of mutual possession. In this opening lyric they are defined by their relationship to the land, and do not exist beyond their status as owners. And while the ownership articulated here is joint possession, it is not communal – there is no mention of “our” land, but simply of “your” and “my” land. In song, of course, the “you” and “me” are potentially infinite, defined only by the singers. Indeed, in Guthrie’s anthem ownership is determined by singing; for it is by joining the chorus that the singer comes to own “this land.” Notably, this relationship between the singer-subjects is constituted by the land itself: the pronouns are separated from each other on the page (and in performance) by two instances of the word “land.” In this opening line, then, the materiality of the land is paramount: it alone comprises the connection between the singer-subjects who have yet to become “you” and “me.”

The grammatical structure of “This Land” is significant because it points to Guthrie’s subversion of conventional property claims, and undermines the notion of asylum as a strictly bounded space. This subversion is evident by the chorus’s final line, in which the relationship between the singer-subjects has altered. The song closes with “This land was made for *you* and *me*,” and here the possessive pronouns of the opening line -- “your” and “my” -- have been replaced with objective pronouns. The “you” and “me” are not markers of ownership, but of identity. Echoing this change, the word “land” is mentioned only once. And when “land” is mentioned, it is not placed between the singer-subjects, and thus does not intercede or link the subjects as in the earlier line. The locus of the first line – the “land” – has shifted, and the emphasis now rests on the claim that the land “*was made* for you and me” (emphasis mine). This simplified syntax expresses a complex claim. No longer is the land merely “yours” and “mine.” In these later lines, Guthrie extends his assertion beyond the assertion of current ownership to a declaration of originary intent. Indeed, the song’s final line is a surprisingly sophisticated and wide-reaching creation narrative. “This Land” and “you and me” are inextricably bound together here – the land was created for “you and me,” and thus exists for our benefit. Guthrie’s lyric asserts not simply ownership but also intent; “This Land” was always already made for the speaker and her audience. The definitive action of this verse, therefore, is not reclamation. “This Land” is not a familiar counter-culture

assertion of the subaltern as the earth's rightful owner. The song does not throw the citizen's hat into the ring alongside corporate and propertied America's claims of ownership, but makes a much more radical assertion. It transcends property rights by asserting that "this land" is inherently "yours" and "mine," precisely because it was made to be so. In doing so Guthrie declares that the temporary, provisional claims of legal rights cannot match the pre-existing status of not just *mine* but *made for me*. Subsequent claims of mere ownership must pale before this original entitlement.⁶⁴ Ontologically, then, the land is ours. Such is the difference between "this land *is* your land" and "This land was *made* for you and me." In the latter framework, the "No trespassing" sign of the earlier verse is rendered comic in its absurdity, as the tenuousness of its hold is revealed. Guthrie's radical claim of originary intent – that the land cannot be separated from its primary purpose – is inherently expansionist. Discontented with borders, Guthrie transcends the notions of law and property rights which so define legal asylum claims and instead renders the entire "this land" an eternal refuge. By invalidating such claims of property rights and ownership, Guthrie subverts the notion of bounded asylum. Indeed, the assertion of ownership here constitutes an inherent space of refuge. Not simply a declaration of property rights, Guthrie's song lays claim to the "land" as national territory -- and not merely as soil. "This Land" is thus an assertion of citizenship, of subjectivity in the particular nation-state of the United States. It is a claim of status, standing, and legitimacy for "you" and "me." In this way, Guthrie's vision is one of remarkable scale. He does dream of a sanctuary that cowers or even colonizes, but instead declares the entire space of "this land" – identified as America by the geographical markers of "California" and "New York Island" – to be refuge. The inviolable space is now the existential "this land." Guthrie's anthem redraws asylum not as a state of exception but as the norm, not a space of retreat but of standing still.

The expansionism of "This Land" is accompanied by an increasing abstraction. The song is usually read as memorably concrete, as the geographical details of "redwood forest" and "Gulf Stream waters" are such transparent signifiers of the American

⁶⁴ The assertion of ownership here constitutes an inherent space of refuge. Not simply a declaration of property rights, Guthrie lays claim to not just the "land" as earth, but also as national territory. "This Land" is thus an assertion of citizenship, of subjectivity in the particular nation-state of the United States. It is a claim of status, standing, and legitimacy.

landscape. But in fact the song becomes progressively more and more abstract as materiality is abandoned and the verses reach beyond the familiar borders of the nation. In the relief office verse the speaker encounters the ravages of the dust bowl, which lead him to end the verse with a question rather than a declaration. Shaken by the suffering of the Great Depression, the speaker wonders "Is this land made for you and me?" This question is answered in the song's final lines, when Guthrie replies to the fourth stanza's "No Trespassing" sign with an invocation of infinity:

Nobody living can ever stop me,
As I go walking that freedom highway;
Nobody living can ever make me turn back
This Land was made for you and me.

Here, the song's expansionist impulse is not effortless but almost dogged. There is a workmanlike application to the task in this verse, and although resistance is anticipated, the speaker determines to endure: "Nobody living can ever stop me/...Nobody living can ever make me turn back." In this way the speaker travels not only along "freedom's highway," but also towards the lyric progression of the concluding line. Thus it is not simply the journey along the "freedom highway" which will meet with resistance, but also the journey to the final line and its creation narrative. Stripped of the specific topographical features of the "diamond desert" or "golden valley" of earlier verses, the imagery in this concluding stanza is conspicuously abstract. The only material feature of the landscape is the "freedom highway." The primary characteristic of this almost undifferentiated landscape is the speaker's movement through it. Here, Guthrie's lyric imagination of nationalized asylum is stripped to the bone. Like *The Grapes of Wrath*, this final verse is preoccupied with boundaries. Like park literature, it expands beyond those borders. And while "God Bless America" is an appeal for benediction, "This Land is Your Land" is a declaration of ownership that expands to the edge of the sky, as far as the speaker can see. This is not retreat but breathtaking expansion, as the zone of exception – the migrant camp or national park – is blown open here beyond the enclosed space. Instead, this final verse depicts a "highway" – a thoroughfare to somewhere else -- from which the speaker, that rightful owner of the nation, cannot be swayed. There is no

Weedpatch at the end of Guthrie's road, no national park to enclose an endangered landscape. Instead, the speaker – and everyone who sings along – is unrestricted by a perimeter, and travels resolutely through the unbounded “this land.” In the concluding lines of "This Land is Your Land," American asylum occupies no less space than America entire. Guthrie's anthem renders sanctuary equivalent with the nation itself, through the abandonment of material detail and embrace of the expansionist abstract.

Chapter 2

'Mississippi River Blues':

Engineering Refuge in the

Great Mississippi Flood of 1927

It was in Nineteen Twenty-Seven. It was an awful time to know.
Through many towns and counties God let the water flow.
The people worked in vain, but God wouldn't stop the rain.
Lord, he poured out His flood upon the land.

--Elders McIntorsh and Edwards, 'The 1927 Flood.'

I worked on the levee, mama, both night and day.
I worked on the levee, mama, both night and day.
I ain't got nobody to keep the water away.

--Kansas Joe and Memphis Minnie, 'When the Levee Breaks'

In the winter and spring of 1927, it rained like never before. Record amounts of rainfall in America caused the Mississippi River to rise so high that it surpassed all known marks. From Cairo, Illinois to New Orleans, Louisiana, newspapers were filled with reports of the worst flood in recorded history. And on Good Friday 1927, a devastating storm pushed the Mississippi River's strained levees beyond capacity:

That day, the great storm would pour 6 to 15 inches of rain [poured] over several hundred thousand square miles, north into Missouri and Illinois, west into Texas, east almost to Alabama, south to the Gulf of Mexico...New Orleans would receive the greatest rainfall ever known there; in eighteen hours officially 14.96 inches fell, more in some parts. That amount, in less than a day, exceeded one-quarter the average precipitation New Orleans received in an entire year...It was

the fifth storm since January more severe than any storm in the preceding ten years. (Barry 15, 228)

The downpour was disastrous. It swelled the already bloated Mississippi River to dangerously high levels, and three days later, on Easter Saturday, “the Mississippi River was in flood stage from Cairo [Illinois] to the Gulf of Mexico” (Otto 68).⁶⁵ All eyes and hands turned to the levee system – the network of earthen walls designed both to block up natural breaks in the river’s banks and thus protect settlements along the Mississippi’s edge from flooding.⁶⁶ Levee bursts would be calamitous, and attempts to maintain the earthen bulwarks were redoubled. Paradoxically, however, the more effective the levee system became the greater the risk of a pressure break, for “there was no escape now from the channel, no break or spillway in the entire thousand-mile line from Cairo, Illinois, to the Gulf of Mexico...[and] as the tributaries of the Mississippi all filled and began pouring their loads into the main channel simultaneously...that mass of water had to move home to the Gulf, to sea level” (Daniels 5, 7).⁶⁷ Despite attempts to shore up the

⁶⁵ A Mississippi River flood is not an irregular occurrence. Indeed, flooding is part of the river’s natural rhythm: “The river had its own flood cycle, usually flooding in the spring and again in early summer to carry home the spring rain and melted snow, then settling back into its bed during late summer” (Daniels 2). But this flood cycle threatened communities and agriculture along the Mississippi’s fertile shores. So from the earliest days of European settlement in the region, levees were constructed to protect individual sections of the riverbanks. Until the Mississippi River Commission was established in 1879 to centralize flood control efforts, communities simply built higher and stronger levees than towns across the river, hoping that when the river rose, their own bulwark would hold at the expense of their neighbours. The proliferation of levees, however, unintentionally caused the engorged Mississippi to become even more dangerous: “Constraining all the water to the river’s main channel concentrated all its force into one avenue, increasing the danger of a break...being hammered through one of the retaining walls” (Briggs 26).

⁶⁶ The 1927 flood resulted in new legislation governing Mississippi River management. The 1928 Jadwin Plan – known as ‘Project Flood’ – is based on the notion that levees alone cannot provide adequate flood control, and is therefore a repudiation of the controversial ‘levees only’ policy. The Jadwin Plan created minimum standards for levee height and width, but it also required that the Army Corps of Engineers build reservoirs and floodways to relieve the pressure created by the levee system (Barry 423). The extent of this 1928 legislation is remarkable; the *New York Times* reported that the Jadwin Plan was “the greatest expenditure the government has undertaken except in the World War.” The full history of Mississippi River management and levee maintenance is legendarily complex; for commentary, see Arthur Frank’s *The Development of the Federal Program of Flood Control on the Mississippi River* (1930); Raphael Kazmann’s *If the Old River Control Structure Fails?*; P. V. Scarpino’s *Great River: An Environmental History of the Upper Mississippi* (1985); and *The Big Muddy: An Environmental History of the Mississippi and Its Peoples from Hernando de Soto to Hurricane Katrina* by Christopher Morris (2012).

⁶⁷ The record-breaking water levels in 1927 were the result not only of unusually high rainfall but also of an extensive levee system. Over-farming in the form of sprawling plantation agriculture and deforestation along riverbanks also contributed to the devastation.

embankments, the swollen Mississippi could not be contained, and the first levees gave way on April 16 and 19, followed by further devastating breaks on April 21 (Otto 69).⁶⁸ The levee at Mounds Landing, Mississippi was one of the worst breaks; it released a flood of water “more than double the volume of Niagara Falls...It put water over the tops of houses in Yazoo City – seventy-five miles away” (“Fatal Flood”). One witness recalled that the breach was so severe that the levee “just seemed to move forward as if 100 feet of it was pushed out by the river” (Daniels 14). The levee failures were catastrophic. For although the crevasses released pressure on the swollen Mississippi River, their failure marked a worsening of the emergency: “After the initial burst the water began ripping down the sides of the crevasse, making an ever-widening breach and causing the flood water to advance at a slow-walking pace across the fields” (Briggs 27). Following the breach of the Mounds Landing levee, “within 10 days, the flood covered one million Delta acres under ten feet of muddy water” (Otto 69). Over the next several weeks there were 42 major levee breaks, which together resulted in “an inland sea a thousand miles long and fifty miles wide” (Daniels 9, Leuchtenburg 68). In effect, during the spring of 1927 the flooded Mississippi River “reclaimed its alluvial plain” (Daniels 8).⁶⁹

The most disastrous effect of the deluge was displacement, as some 637,000 Americans were forced to flee their homes (Colored Advisory Commission Report). Entire communities were washed away: homes, livestock and livelihoods all disappeared, and the Mississippi Delta became a disaster zone. One day after the Mounds Landing crevasse, President Calvin Coolidge federalized the crisis by appointing Herbert Hoover – then Secretary of Commerce – to chair a disaster commission which would eventually become the Mississippi Flood Committee. This committee was faced with a daunting

⁶⁸ A natural break in the levee – a place where flood waters break through or overtop the embankment – is called a ‘crevasse.’ At times, however, levees are deliberately breached in order to reduce strain on the main channel and to protect communities further downriver. These human-made crevasses are known as ‘backwaters,’ as made famous in the hit song ‘Back-Water Blues,’ recorded by Bessie Smith in 1927.

⁶⁹ To put the flood in historical perspective: at the height of the devastating Mississippi River flood of 1993, “the river in Iowa carried 435,000 cubic feet of water a second; at St. Louis...it carried 1 million cubic feet a second. It was enough water to devastate the Midwest and make headlines around the world. In 1927...The Mississippi River [carried] in excess of *three* million cubic feet of water each second” (Barry 16, emphasis original).

task, for what came to be known as the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 was “the worst natural disaster in the nation’s history” (Leuchtenburg 68). It drowned over 16 million acres of land across seven states, flooded 162,000 homes, and caused over \$100 million dollars in crop losses (Daniels 10).⁷⁰ The American National Red Cross provided most of the disaster relief, and operated 154 refugee camps in the affected areas, which together housed more than 325,000 people – 69% of whom were African American (Colored Advisory Commission Report). The Red Cross raised and spent \$17 million dollars on flood relief, and the federal government contributed over \$30 million dollars to the recovery effort (Coolidge, Leuchtenburg 64). Although the Red Cross publicly reported only 246 people killed in the flood, John Barry – the disaster’s most thorough historian – disputes this count as much too low, and the Red Cross itself privately warned that this number was “not necessarily reliable.” As environmental historian Ted Steinberg notes, this undercounting is likely related to the era’s explicit racism: “Surely a relationship exists between the low body count and the demographics of the Yazoo-Mississippi delta...populated overwhelmingly by black farmers, who some may have deemed not worth counting” (71).⁷¹

The recovery effort was as massive as the disaster itself. By June 1927, the waters had begun to recede, and some residents returned to what was left of their homes. Many others had to wait until August before the Mississippi finally retreated back to its

⁷⁰ The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 remains the benchmark against which all catastrophic flooding in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta is measured. During the flood of spring 2011, news reports compared the deluge to the record-breaking flood of 1927: “A surge of water not seen since the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 is forecast in coming days to test the enormous levees lining the Mississippi River on its course through the Deep South...Experts continue to predict all-time records for the Mississippi Delta, projecting the river to run several feet above the height it reached in...1927, when the river broke its banks, flooded 27,000 square miles, killed hundreds and displaced thousands” (*Times* 28 April 2011). The *LA Times* noted that water levels in historic Vicksburg, Mississippi surpassed the record heights set in April 1927, and many news outlets reminded Americans that major spillways only exist because of the 1927 flood. The Morganza Spillway in particular was built as part of the flood management plan inspired by the 1927 deluge. Designed specifically to shelter Americans from ever again experiencing such devastation, the Morganza spillway was put to work when its gates were opened in May 2011, flooding rural areas in order to protect major population centres.

⁷¹ Steinberg argues that the public memory of disaster is similarly raced. He notes that two deadly hurricanes in 1893 and a third in 1928 – which together killed many thousands of African-American migrant workers and sharecroppers – do not loom large in the public memory. Indeed, he argues, these catastrophes “are scarcely remembered at all...Apparently, race has had a filtering effect on the collective memory of disaster” (70). It is this 1928 Florida hurricane that inspired the final chapter of Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937).

banks. The cost of recovery was immense, and the pace slow: an entire season of crops had been lost, with no income earned by either planters or sharecroppers. Livestock was dead or missing, homes were destroyed or badly damaged by both water and the tonnes of silt carried by the flood. Just as the levees breaches didn't mark the end of the disaster, neither did the eventual receding of the flood waters conclude the catastrophe. As the Memphis newspaper the *Commercial Appeal* reported of Clarendon, Arkansas in May 1927: "The stores are wrecked and their perishable stock is rotting in the streets...The stench in Clarendon is unbearable. Mud and slime fill the streets. A carload of lime for disinfecting purposes is to arrive tomorrow." Mary Wells Wood, a public health nurse in the flooded area, witnessed similar ongoing damage, lamenting "the devastation wrought by the flood waters, the endless labor to retrieve losses, the long period without funds, and the isolation resulting from the loss of the dearly beloved old Ford or the faithful mules, that used to carry [displaced flood victims] over roads and bridges now washed away" (Daniels 127).

But the 1927 deluge transformed more than the physical landscape of the Mississippi Delta. The worst natural disaster in American history also changed the nation itself. America's contemporary flood management policy is still based on the federal plan for flood control born of the 1927 deluge. The disaster also prompted many African-Americans to join the northward flow of the Great Migration, abandoning the Delta and rural sharecropping for life in urban centres. And, for the first time, disaster relief became a federal responsibility. No longer would recovery from flood, fire, drought and storm be solely dependent upon local governments and private charity. The disaster relief effort was similarly unprecedented. In the Great Mississippi Flood, the provision of asylum reached new heights. The accounts of asylum providers -- those who secured refuge for the many dispossessed -- recount this massive effort. And these texts are not merely descriptive: converting natural disaster into a narrative of disaster is ideological work. The genre doesn't just depict cataclysm -- it also fashions it. This is particularly evident in asylum providers' accounts of flood refugees and what constitutes refuge in the catastrophic moment. Herbert Hoover -- future president and the flood's relief committee chairman -- recalls the disaster in *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover* (1952). Along with Will Irwin's authorized hagiography *Herbert Hoover: A Reminiscent Biography* (1928),

Hoover's text re-writes catastrophe by depicting sanctuary as the work of a singular archetype -- the hero-engineer. President Calvin Coolidge's 1927 State of the Union address assumes federal responsibility for the provision of refuge by declaring *natural* disaster *national* disaster -- although not without rhetorical caveats. And Reverend Sutton E. Griggs' flood sermon 'Saving the Day' (1928) attempts to re-cast the disaster narrative, depicting African-Americans as securers of asylum rather than as flood refugees. In the flooded disaster-scape of the 1927 Mississippi Delta, asylum providers rather than flood refugees define that nature of refuge.

Herbert Hoover: Cleansing the Flood Narrative

Water, water, more than I've ever seen.
 The water is still rising from Memphis down to New Orleans.
 I feel so bad, I don't know what I'll ever do.
 As long as I live, I'll have the Mississippi River blues.
 --Laura Smith, 'The Mississippi Blues.'

Herbert Hoover was a natural choice for Chairman of the Great Mississippi Flood relief committee. During and after the First World War, the future president led a massive food relief program in Europe. And following the war, when the American government established its first international humanitarian agency – the American Relief Administration – Herbert Hoover was its program director. In this role, Hoover led continued food relief efforts in Europe, as well as the American aid program in the devastating Soviet famine of 1921-1923. His international successes were well publicized at home, and Hoover became known as the ‘Great Humanitarian.’ When he died in 1964, his *New York Times* obituary reported a Hoover associate saying, “He fed more people and saved more lives than any other man in history.” Although in the 1920s Hoover was seen as a singular humanitarian, his public reputation was shattered by the Great Depression. Hoover’s inability to resolve the economic emergency and apparent

indifference to its consequences led to widespread public disdain.⁷² In the 1930s, shanty towns like the one the Joad family visits in *The Grapes of Wrath* were named 'Hoovervilles' in the president's dubious honour. But in 1927, Hoover's reputation was still unmarked by the Great Depression, and many Americans admired him for his efficient humanitarianism. Indeed, at the time of the flood, Hoover was a self-made millionaire and the most famous man in a revered profession. At the turn of the twentieth century, new technologies led to innovations such as skyscrapers, rapid railway lines and span bridges, and revolutionized existing construction techniques for tunnels and canals. These technological marvels piqued public interest in both the edifices and their designers. A trained mining engineer, Herbert Hoover entered public life at a fortuitous moment, for "the engineer at the turn of the century was a celebrated national hero -- a man who, literally, would erect the brave new century" (Ammons 746).⁷³ American culture reflected this interest in modern manufacturing. Novels and films featured engineers as protagonists, and many popular magazine articles celebrated the profession's "stupendous accomplishments and the derring-do lives of its most glamorous representatives" (Ammons 750).⁷⁴ Hoover himself was featured in this techno-heroic discourse, in magazine articles such as 'Hoover: Specialist in Public Calamities,' and 'How Hoover's Forces Fought the Flood.' This rhetoric celebrated the emerging technological mastery which defined the first decades of the twentieth century. In this national iconography, the hero-engineer is "the American exemplar of specifically

⁷² In recent decades, Hoover's public image has been reassessed by historians, some of whom challenge the popular view of Hoover as an unfeeling, ineffective president. Ellis Hawley reviews this shift in "Herbert Hoover and Modern American History: Sixty Years After," as do Patrick O'Brien and Philip Rosen in "Hoover and the Historians: The Resurrection of a President." And Hoover's public image improved somewhat in 1940s, when President Harry Truman called on his predecessor to manage the radical food shortage facing Europe in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. Nancy Gibbs and Michael Duffy describe the relationship between Hoover and Truman, and the impact it had on Hoover's reputation in *The Presidents Club* (2012).

⁷³ Martin Green describes the cultural roots of the masculine adventure figure and the martial ideal in *The Great American Adventure* (1984).

⁷⁴ In her analysis of Willa Cather's *Alexander's Bridge* (1912) -- a novel featuring an engineer-protagonist -- Ammons provides a list of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century popular writing on the engineer-hero, including sources such as *Scribner's* 'The Railways of the Future' and *McClure's* 'The Web-Footed Engineer.' In "Engineering Power: Hoover, Rand, Pound and the Heroic Architect," Sharon Stockton notes that Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* (1943) also features a variant of the engineer-protagonist in architect Howard Roark. And in *Shifting Gears: Technology, Literature and Culture in Modernist America*, Cecelia Tichi both defines the engineer-hero and examines engineering novels and films of the era.

modern forms of technological power and industrial management" (Stockton 813). And Hoover's personification of this uniquely modern archetype was essential to his political success.⁷⁵ As Cecelia Tichi notes, "the public was largely prepared to elect him president because writers...had successfully embodied America itself in the figure of the heroic engineer" (170). And it is as an engineer that Herbert Hoover leads flood recovery efforts in 1927. The rhetoric of mastery is a signal element of the relief committee chairman's depiction of disaster management. The engineer's characteristically efficient use of resources -- both human and technological -- is evident in Hoover's discourse. In his account of the Great Mississippi Flood, Hoover insists that asylum was secured solely through local, voluntary means, and not government intervention. In a pithy declaration, he characterizes massive efforts to relieve the worst natural disaster in American history as a local affair: "I suppose I could have called in the whole of the army. But...all I had to do was call in Main Street" (Leuchtenburg 69). This breezy, almost casual reflection points to Hoover's belief that "Main Street" -- presumably an accumulation of paradigmatic merchants, professionals, and average citizens -- is adequate to a national disaster. The great engineer here designates local Americans as his greatest resource. This assertion elevates the small town and by extension the average American to almost implausible heights. Here Hoover suggests that nothing is beyond the hardy, charitable residents of Main Street, Anytown, USA.⁷⁶ In his memoir, the future president further emphasizes the power of the local American by identifying this idealized citizen as his single "lasting impression" of the Mississippi Flood (131). This "impression" concludes Hoover's flood memoir, and in it he underscores the distinctive Americanness of his

⁷⁵ Hoover's faith in technological expertise is typical of Progressivism, which espouses professionalization and reliance on specialists. Early in his career Hoover was associated with Progressivism -- its proponents urged him to run for the presidency in 1920 -- and Hoover was particularly sympathetic to the movement's anti-trust tenets (Leuchtenburg 45-7). Joan Hoff Wilson's *Herbert Hoover: Forgotten Progressive* (1992) explores the relationship between the president and the philosophy with which he is so rarely linked in popular memory. Yet Hoover clearly did not fully endorse Progressive values. As Clements notes in *Hoover, Conservation, and Consumerism* (2000), Hoover did not share Progressivism's belief in centralizing policy and decision making in Washington (5). Instead, Hoover's political approach, Clements suggests, is best characterized as a balance between "centralized planning and decentralized execution" (3).

⁷⁶ "Main Street" is also implicitly militarized here through comparison with the American army -- Hoover merely had to "call in" the local community as one would "call in" the military. This militarization suggests that every American is a latent soldier -- a formulation which recalls Jefferson's ideal of the citizen-soldier, who puts down his hoe and picks up a musket when the new republic needs defending.

model subject. Hoover reports that while delivering food relief in Europe during the First World War, it was difficult to find adequate community leaders in many small towns. The situation was much different on the flooded American delta in 1927: “[A]mong Americans the merest suggestion sparked efficient and devoted organization – indeed often in advance of specific request. The reasons for this reach to the very base of our American system of life. In this there also lies a special tribute to the peoples of these States” (131). This faith in the local constitutes a vision of America in which philanthropy, not government obligation, is the infrastructure of refuge. In Hoover’s recounting, Main Street volunteers – it is charity that comprises asylum here. Significantly, this emphasis on the voluntary elides violent and coercive aspects of the 1927 deluge, such as the press-ganging of African-Americans into flood relief work and the forced internment of black sharecroppers in refugee camps. In his short story ‘Down by the Riverside,’ Richard Wright narrates the very history Hoover fails to acknowledge here. Wright’s subversion of Hoover’s vision of voluntary asylum will be discussed in the next chapter, and it complicates the relief committee chairman’s assertions of voluntary America’s “efficient and devoted organization.” As Donald Lisio notes in *Hoover, Blacks, and Lily-Whites*, volunteerism in the 1927 flood was “neither as compassionate nor as inspiring as Hoover had claimed” (5). African-Americans in particular were persecuted in a relief process dominated by “local voluntarism and leadership,” in which planters were free to treat their sharecroppers as slaves, without any interference from federal agencies (Lisio 5). But for Hoover, volunteerism is both exceptional and explicitly ideological: it functions as evidence of the superiority of American individualism over European collectivism. Asylum is politically deployed here, as it defines national identity through local character. Hoover’s invocation of “Main Street” rather than a particular street in a particular town is a universalizing gesture. The generalized “Main Street” represents America entire in a way that no single community could. For Hoover, then, the provision of sanctuary is definitive of national identity. In the relief committee chairman’s memoirs, the voluntary provision of refuge denotes the exceptional and superior nature of the American way of life.

This insistence on American exceptionalism is characteristic of Hoover’s political thought, and is echoed in his famous philosophy of rugged individualism. He coined the

phrase during the 1928 presidential campaign, in a speech urging Americans to reject the necessary yet paternalistic state-run economy of the First World War.⁷⁷ Hoover acknowledged that state control of manufacturing, production and distribution is essential in wartime, but argued that the continuation of such policies in peacetime would destroy the unique American character. However justified it was in time of war, a perpetual “socialistic state... would destroy not only our system but progress and freedom in our own country and throughout the world.” America, Hoover believed, was not fundamentally socialist and paternalistic, but essentially and uniquely individualistic. He argued that continued federal manipulation of the economy would constitute an end to self-government and a betrayal of the founders’ aims. “The acceptance of [socialism and paternalism],” he argued, “meant the destruction of self-government... it meant the undermining of initiative and enterprise upon which our people have grown to unparalleled greatness.” American self-reliance, in Hoover's judgment, is threatened by greater government, not enabled by it. Rugged individualism echoes the rhetoric of the hero-engineer; both privilege the individual rather than the state as the locus of social power. The engineer-hero, an independent actor who "distills American individualism," embodies Hoover's political philosophy, and, characteristically, Hoover's account of securing refuge in the Great Mississippi Flood emphasizes the role of the individual (Stockton 817).

Despite his investment in individualism, Hoover was careful to assure citizens that there was still room for government in his philosophy: "Nor do I wish to be misinterpreted as believing that the United States is free-for-all and the devil-take-the-hindmost. The very essence of equality of opportunity is that there shall be no domination by any group or trust or combination in this republic, whether it be business or political. It demands economic justice as well as political and social justice. It is no system to laissez faire." The nation was not unreservedly laissez-faire, as to be so would be to prevent equality. Instead, Hoover confined his call for government exclusion to the economy. Critics, however, continue to disagree as to the exact nature of Hoover's political and economic philosophy and the extent of his dogmatism. In particular,

⁷⁷ Although the future president coined the phrase during the 1928 presidential campaign, the philosophy characterizes Hoover's lifelong commitment to individualism and opposition to centralized federal power.

scholars diverge as to the meaning of Hoover's rugged individualism. Historian William Leuchtenburg argues that Hoover's commitment to unalloyed individualism never wavered, and indeed hardened over time: "What began as a strong predilection ended as catechism" (70). Bruce Lohof, in contrast, argues that Hoover is caricatured as an unfeeling, relentless opponent of any and all government intervention. Lohof suggests instead that Hoover's behavior during the Great Mississippi Flood demonstrates that the President's dominant worldview was one of "humane efficiency": "[H]is intention was to foster individualistic activities with centralized organization...Hoover rejected an assumption...that the concepts *bureaucracy* and *individual* are mutually exclusive, one leading inexorably to the destruction of the other" (697, 699). In particular, Lohof points to Hoover's land resettlement plan – through which he hoped to break the back of sharecropping by redistributing small parcels of land to tenant farmers – as proof of the President's nuanced view of interventionism and laissez-faire economics (696-7).

Hoover's account of the Great Mississippi Flood as evidence of hardy, local American know-how is not surprising from the father of rugged individualism. But despite Hoover's insistence in his *Memoirs* that asylum was a purely local phenomenon, this narrative is performative and aspirational as much as historically factual. Certainly, the relief committee chairman's vision of Main Street as the savior of the Great Mississippi Flood is almost entirely fictionalized. As historian William Leuchtenburg notes,

Never would [Hoover] acknowledge that two out of every three dollars spent to cope with the flood came from government or that he had to depend on federal agencies...for the essentials of his operation: sixty planes, hundreds of ships, field equipment, and tents to quarter the victims...In his hostility to bureaucracy, Hoover showed no awareness that he was not only the premier bureaucrat of the decade but the man most responsible for swollen government agencies. (64, 70)

Indeed, in reality Hoover's management of the 1927 disaster was much more complex than his memoir suggests. Although his autobiography celebrates the local, when even the Red Cross's remarkably successful fundraising drive proved inadequate to the worst

national disaster in the nation's history, Hoover efficiently made use of federal resources. In effect, Hoover nationalized the provision of refuge in American natural disasters, even as he doggedly insisted that the relief effort was entirely a local, voluntary and amateur affair.⁷⁸ Thus there is a rhetorical gap between the story Hoover tells and the story he insists he is telling. This provocative disparity is not an index of the relief committee chairman's hypocrisy; instead, the breach is productive. Hoover says he's telling the story of local heroism, but instead describes relief work in the Great Mississippi Flood as the sole achievement of the hero-engineer. Indeed, the deployment of the technocrat as disaster narrative protagonist is consequential. For in Herbert Hoover's *Memoirs* and in Will Irwin's *Reminiscent Biography*, the hero-engineer doesn't build bridges and canals, but instead secures asylum. Consequently, Hoover and Irwin's texts are transformed from disaster narratives to narratives of recovery.⁷⁹ Refuge is secured by the archetypal hero of the era's popular fiction, who demonstrates modernity's newfound control of nature. This gap reveals literary re-fashioning as the definitive gesture of Herbert Hoover's memoir. For Hoover's memoir not only casts the hero-engineer as disaster narrative protagonist, but also re-writes the other catastrophic subjects: local heroes and flood refugees.

This gap between the philosophy and practice of asylum is particularly noticeable in Hoover's public speeches. The relief committee chairman spent much of the flood

⁷⁸ Scholars have noted other disparities in Hoover's *Memoirs*. In his definitive, multi-volume biography, Kendrick A. Clements notes that Hoover's account of the health program to reduce infectious diseases in South following the 1927 flood "exaggerated its achievements" (385). And in Clements' *Hoover, Conservation, and Consumerism* (2000), he asserts that Hoover "overstated the success of postflood private reconstruction programs and exaggerated his role in the engineering aspects of the flood control system built after 1927" (112).

⁷⁹ Cecelia Tichi ably excavates the under-attended hero-engineer -- whom she calls the "invisible man of American studies" -- in *Shifting Gears: Technology, Literature, Culture in Modernist America* (1987). She then demonstrates how turn-of-the-century technology and the figure of the hero-engineer influence the work of Hemingway, dos Passos and William Carlos Williams. In a coda, Tichi briefly examines Herbert Hoover as an example of the hero-engineer archetype. Sharon Stockton applies the archetype to the work of Ezra Pound and Ayn Rand as well as the life of Herbert Hoover, and argues that "the American rhetoric of the heroic engineer is, in some ways, the rhetoric of the fascist hero" (815). Andrew Ross, in *Strange Weather: Culture, Science and Technology in the Age of Limits* (1991) examines different manifestations of science in mainstream culture -- including weather forecasting and computer hacking -- and uses the hero-engineer as a measure of early twentieth century investment in a rhetoric of idealized efficiency. While these scholars skillfully identify and engage with the notion of the hero-engineer, I am interested in the generic consequences of deploying the archetype in disaster narratives.

travelling by train to affected areas. He frequently visited towns which were as yet untouched by the deluge, but would soon be inundated by refugees. As the levees burst and more Mississippi Delta residents were forced from their homes, displaced people flooded into the remaining dry territory. Hoover's standard whistle-stop speech to these unwitting places of refuge is a typical example of his tough, up-by-your-bootstraps attitude. Will Irwin, Hoover's official campaign biographer, described Hoover's speech: "A couple thousand refugees are coming. They've got to have accommodations. Huts. Water-mains. Sewers. Streets. Dining-halls. Meals. Doctors. Everything. And you haven't got months to do it. You haven't got weeks. You've got hours. That's my train" (Leuchtenburg 68). This swift, rat-a-tat syntax reads like an echo, and even a satire, of military precision. Hoover uses the sparest of prose here, and his single word sentences lack both verbs and articles. The abbreviated sentence structure reflects the urgency of the relief effort. No words are wasted, and Hoover's rhetorical style communicates essential details economically. Here Hoover is a model of rhetorical efficiency, at a moment in American life when "the cults of efficiency and waste conservation presided over everyday life" (Ross 122). This idiom effectively strips away every aspect of speech except the imperative. For in addition to jettisoning adornment, Hoover's lecture wastes no time on explanation or consultation. The speaker informs rather than discusses – he does not hold a town hall meeting – and despite the relief committee chairman's vaunted emphasis on volunteerism, there is no opportunity for the soon-to-be host communities to opt out of their task. This rhetoric reflects historical practice, for Hoover's "authority within the flood area was essentially dictatorial, though masked in the language of voluntarism" (Clements 115, *Conservation*).⁸⁰ Irwin's account of Hoover's standard speech reflects this structure, for it's a monologue rather than a dialogue. Thus Hoover's speech is a display of bald command and rough realism. Efficiency is achieved here not only through spare, terse prose but also through similarly restricted access to speech. Information flows only one way in Hoover's whistle-stop lectures; and it is this non-reciprocal structure as well as Hoover's syntax that makes his speech itself a model of

⁸⁰ Stockton suggests the violence implicit in this rhetoric of in her analysis of the links between "fascist thought and the figure of the heroic engineer," and asserts that, if it must, the engineer's refashioning of the natural world in the realization of "moves with a benevolent violence" (815, 826).

efficiency. The affected communities will not be shepherded through the crisis by the great man himself, but will be left with detailed directions. The brief and no doubt stunning sermon delivered by the relief committee chairman is almost gleeful in its evanescence. Hoover gave this speech to ninety-one separate communities, as he spent most of his first three months on the job “traversing the [Mississippi River] valley in a private Pullman car – moving ceaselessly from Cairo to New Orleans and back again” (Leuchtenburg 68). At each stop Hoover’s speech deploys a kind of rhetorical shock and awe; he stuns his listeners not with missiles and bombs but with facts and doom. And then he departs, leaving the work to the assembled towns.⁸¹

In *Herbert Hoover: A Reminiscent Biography*, Will Irwin also narrates the gap between the rhetoric and practice of asylum, and valorizes not local flood relief but the hero-engineer. Irwin depicts the chairman at work during the Mississippi disaster:

I saw him one May morning of 1927 standing on the tottering Melville levee, his aeroplanes scouting overhead, his mosquito-fleet scurrying below, a group of prominent citizens about him listening to the wise, quick, terse directions which were bringing order out of chaos. It symbolizes the man, that scene -- 'The one tranquil among the raging floods,' the transmuter of altruistic emotion into benevolent action. (311)

In an echo of his whistle-stop speech, Herbert Hoover emerges here as the strongman of the disaster narrative. In both accounts, the relief committee chairman is the succinct, tough truth-teller who directs locals to act. This depiction of the strongman regulating pandemonium is a particular subgenre of the disaster narrative -- one we might call a disaster romance. A fantasy of the great man, Irwin's fawning biography depicts not the collective 'Main Street,' but the singular hero. For while scale is indeed essential to Hoover's vision of asylum, it is not the miniature of the individual or small town that is celebrated here. Instead, Irwin's is a vision of magnitude – not of the disaster, which is

⁸¹ The depiction of flood relief in Irwin's account is both misleading and accurate: "Of course, the process was neither that simple nor dramatic...[y]et the description carried truth" (Clements 376). Although truckloads of supplies would follow Hoover's speech, the refugee camps were actually constructed by the towns themselves: "The relief program provided money, supplies, and know-how, and local communities created 154 temporary cities" (376).

elided -- but of the man himself. Hoover is made singular here: in the biographer's account, he is literally "the one." Irwin singles Hoover out as the sole "tranquil" presence in the midst of disaster, and the only one who can transform affect into action. "It symbolizes the man, that scene," Irwin declares, and with this metaphor relegates the worst natural disaster in American history to mere backdrop. The scene on the Melville levee is notable not because it depicts flood relief, but because it emblemizes Herbert Hoover himself. Irwin's is an account of an extraordinary man rather than an extraordinary event. And as such, *Herbert Hoover: A Reminiscent Biography* is such an apt encapsulation of the hero-engineer that it "follows the fictional formula to the letter" (Tichi 169).

And Hoover is indeed a definitively transformative figure here. While volunteers might be willing, it is only the great man who can make flood relief out of emotion, and "order out of chaos." This power of metamorphosis grants Hoover a slightly otherworldly aura. A few lines later Irwin returns to this romantic depiction: "Hoover touched flood-relief with his magic hand. Immediately, life-boats and crews were speeding west-ward from the Atlantic coast, aeroplanes winging from the army and navy fields...Then, like one of those trick moving pictures, lines which signified nothing by themselves jumped together into coherent meaning" (310). Irwin's biography is no factual account of a leader at work, but a vision of a man so powerful that he is "magical." This vision initially appears at odds with the scientific hero-engineer, but does not ultimately undercut technocracy. Instead, here Irwin endows Hoover with the power of modernity's magic, and engages with the rhetoric of science as miracle. The relief committee chairman is supernaturally efficient here, in a testament to Hoover as individuated, modern hero.

This conversion of disaster narrative into disaster romance is significant, for it recasts not merely the asylum provider but also the vaunted volunteers. In Irwin's account, they aren't elevated by virtue of their work – it is not the rescue of their fellow citizens which conveys romance and importance here. Instead, it is conflation with the hero. Irwin's description of Hoover on the Melville levee reads like a *tableau-vivant*, with Hoover "standing...[and] bringing order out of chaos" while planes "scout," boats

“scurry,” and citizens “listen” (70). The relief committee chairman not only commands, but also owns here. Both aircraft and boats are “his” – Hoover’s possession of them is casually assumed. He is elevated beyond mere director to proprietor, and the resources he commands are therefore not the materiel of local communities, but always already Hoover’s. When disaster hits, planes and boats and pilots and captains are not simply at Hoover’s service – they *are* Hoover’s. The man and his tools are conflated in this vision, which further enlarges Hoover’s scale and importance. Hoover, volunteers and resources are now indistinguishable. And to that extent, Irwin's campaign biography also constitutes a fantasy: it imagines not perfected asylum, but the perfected *provision* of asylum. In both Hoover and Irwin’s accounts, there is no gap between the engineer and his resources, between command and action. The prosaic, months-long struggle to return the flooded delta to some kind of normalcy is elided here, in favour of a vision of idealized, efficient integration.

In this vision, volunteers are not individuated local heroes but tools. Although Hoover suggests in his memoirs that Main Street is heroic by virtue of its uniquely American competence, in Irwin's account volunteers are demoted not merely from lead role to supporting player, but to mute props in a one man show.⁸² In *A Reminiscent Biography*, Hoover is the sole embodiment of American exceptionalism. This is evident in the relief committee chairman's physicality; he is enlarged here, looming over the other undifferentiated figures on the Melville levee. He contains multitudes – multitudes of both volunteers and resources. In this text, Irwin renders Hoover not a Relief Committee Chairman, but relief incarnate. Rescue efforts – the provision of asylum – becomes more and more condensed, so that ultimately, in Irwin’s account, all that is needed to stop the Great Mississippi Flood is Hoover himself. This highly individuated disaster narrative constitutes a romance of singularity, in which a singular, exceptional figure is the solution to disaster.

⁸² As Stockton notes, this emphasis on the "mastermind" and not the worker is characteristic of Taylorism, in which the "the worker was only a unit to be scientifically managed so as to better and more efficiently reflect the will of the man in charge" (814).

Just as Main Street is given short shrift in Hoover and Irwin's accounts, so too do these texts emphasise the process of recovery rather than the catastrophe itself. In Hoover's *Memoirs*, the chapter which recounts the deluge is entitled "An Interlude – Relief in the Mississippi Flood of 1927." This title reveals Herbert Hoover's focus; his memoir emphasizes "relief" from the deluge, and not the flood itself. The relief committee chairman's account is not the narrative of a traumatized witness, emotionally recounting the memory of human disaster. Instead, Hoover's account is highly practical; the flood is treated as a problem to be solved, and Hoover recounts exactly how he accomplished that formidable task.⁸³ The work of an accomplished engineer, Hoover's memoir emphasizes the author's mastery of relief efforts. His presence having been requested by the governors of the affected states, Hoover reports, "President Coolidge complied [with the request]. I went at once to Memphis and took hold" (125). There is no doubt who is in control here, nor that the new disaster management is effective: "[O]nly three lives – one of them that of an overcurious sightseer – were lost after we took charge. There were many fatalities during the few days before that" (125).⁸⁴ Hoover's suggestion that the death toll plummets because of his leadership is characteristic of the text's emphasis on outcome. Of the brief chapter Hoover dedicates to the deluge, several initial paragraphs crisply relate the statistics of the disaster, as Hoover sketches the scope of the problem and how he solved it. The chapter's final lines briefly consider the aftermath of the flood and assert Hoover's faith in American exceptionalism as defined by local, voluntary leadership in moments of crisis. These two sections glorify infrastructure – the process of securing asylum – and the American ability to solve the problem of mass catastrophe.

⁸³ This mode of expression stands in sharp contrast to emotional flood songs such as Charley Patton's "High Water Everywhere," or the barely constrained rage of Richard Wright's "The Man Who Saw the Flood." Hoover's account -- from the perspective of a securer of refuge and not a refugee -- is notable for its tone. This emotional restraint is characteristic of Hoover's public image; Leuchtenburg notes that throughout his career Hoover was plagued by accusations that he was "soul chilling," and impersonal (28, 76). But this aloofness was not the entirety of Hoover's public image, which was always tempered by his efficiency: "Yet, however icy Hoover was, no one questioned that he was prodigiously effective" (Leuchtenburg 29).

⁸⁴ Herbert Hoover's death toll count is, scholars agree, "a totally impossible claim" (Clements *Conservation* 117). Clements characterizes Hoover's insistence on a shockingly low death toll as "appalling," and notes that many of the dead it elides were African-American: "[Hoover's] insistence upon it over the years conflicts with his humanitarian image and cheapens and diminishes his monumental achievement as director of relief" (118).

Having dispensed with the facts and figures of the flood, Hoover dedicates most of his remarks on the 1927 deluge to a series of anecdotes which depict flood refugees. The most extensive is the tale of the Cajun town that did not believe the flood was coming. 'Tale' is used advisedly here, for these accounts have the allegorical character of a fable. This passage in Hoover's memoirs even sounds like a fable, and is all but titled 'The Town That Wouldn't Listen.' Hoover visited the town on his whistle-stop tour, and advised residents that their community was in the path of rising flood waters. Certain steps must be taken, the relief committee chairman instructed: the construction of a refugee camp for the community's 15,000 residents; removal of all possessions to the uppermost floors of available buildings; manufacture of a fleet of rough boats; and the erection of a cement wall around the town's electrical plant. Hoover asserts that modern science assures the necessity of these preparations. "Our engineers had learned to time the advance of the flood accurately and to determine within a few feet the height the water would reach at any point," he declares. "This was a simple problem in hydraulics" (127). Hoover here invokes the rhetoric of the hero-engineer: "Beholden to the primacy of scientific principles, the engineer was called upon to be a functional architect of modernity along the lines of utility" (Ross 122). Despite the scientific inevitability of the coming flood, the town surveyor leads the entire community astray through his parochialism. He announces to Hoover, "You are a Wall Streeter. You intend to rob us. I am a surveyor in this parish. My father was a surveyor before me. There has never been a flood here, there will never be a flood here!" (128).⁸⁵ Convinced by this declaration, the town refuses to undertake the recommended precautions, and the mayor alone is left to order and ensure the construction of the refugee camp.

In contravention of Hoover's self-declared faith in Main Street, local knowledge, conventional wisdom, and provincialism are the culprits in this vignette. The surveyor's reliance on his family's generations of experience in the town, and his father's lifetime, is treated as laughably irrelevant. The surveyor, whose deep roots in the community might

⁸⁵ Hoover's depiction of Cajuns echoes cultural stereotypes of the people of Evangeline as "lazy, uneducated and stupid" (Gaudet 79). Glenn Conrad's "Acadians: Myths and Realities," Velmare Dunn's "A Study of Louisiana Acadians as they are Reflected in the Fiction of Louisiana" and Jacques M. Henry and Carl Leon Bankston III's *Blue Collar Bayou: Louisiana Cajuns in the New Economy of Ethnicity* also review the literary and cultural representation of Cajuns, although Dunn's work endorses as well as recounts these stereotypes.

represent the salt-of-the-earth small town American whom Hoover ostensibly venerates, is instead made a fool. For like any good fable, Hoover's tale ends with a righting of the moral order. After the town floods, Hoover returns on his train with a fleet of boats, and is met by the entire community, who are huddled for safety on the platform of the railway station – the highest point in town. In this moment the formerly doubting community is reassembled into a unified welcoming body, awaiting Hoover's arrival and his promised deliverance from the flood. The town surveyor also gets his just desserts, in the form of dispossession and exile. The man whose family has lived in the county for at least two generations is last seen sailing away in one of the two boats in town. The mayor reports, chuckling, "He said he was leaving for good!" (129).

Yet this comeuppance reveals more than the contested local: it also constitutes a primer on the hero-engineer at work securing asylum. The Cajun town embodies a contest between modernity and tradition. What is inevitable here is not the floodwaters themselves, but Hoover's scientific prediction of the coming deluge. Thus what the town disregards at its own peril is prediction based on scientific expertise, rather than the inundation itself. Significantly, Hoover's story ends on the train platform, and provides no further information as to the extent of the town's damage. The actual destruction wrought by the flood is not the narrative focus here; instead, the relief committee chairman emphasizes the mode by which asylum is secured. In Hoover's account, asylees can only be refuged by the technology of modern engineering. Technical prowess hopelessly outclasses local ignorance here. Tradition, local knowledge, folklore, and history are no match – they cannot establish the borders of refuge, and they will inevitably be swamped, leaving the townspeople huddled on high ground, waiting for rescue. Modern emergency management is the only way of mitigating disaster's effects. In the fable of the doubting Cajun town, Hoover not only identifies scientific efficiency as the preferred mode of securing refuge, but as the single means of effective asylum. Predicting the flood's crest is a "simple problem of hydraulics," and not a matter of what your father knew. And this engineering model works to elide rather than inscribe the individuated local. For relief efforts are not unique to each town. Hoover's whistle-stop tour offers standardized instructions, not individuated advice. Efficiency is of course one of the signal characteristics of the engineer-hero, who streamlines the unruly and various.

Standardization inevitably standardizes: individuation slips away here, replaced by proficient regulation. Local communities and volunteers are cogs in the machine, not the machine itself, and the specificity of this town, about which the surveyor asserts, "there has never been a flood *here*," is rejected by Hoover. Hoover's characterization of "Main Street," then, is ultimately apt. For as the relief committee chairman's memoir shows, it is the generalized local which he valorizes, while the specific acts of local rescuers and refugees are elided. This standardization explains why the flood itself gets such short shrift in Hoover's memoirs. The particularity of the disaster is irrelevant; what matters is the program Hoover identifies as the solution to *every* disaster. Thus Hoover's memoir does not struggle to encompass the scope of the flood. The catastrophe is individuated only to the barest extent; what is detailed here is the prescribed program of catastrophe management and the provision of refuge. The fable of the doubting Cajun town, then, is a model of the hero-engineer at work, securing asylum through techno-modernity.

Hoover's ambiguous investment in the local is also apparent in how he allocates the tasks of securing asylum. The fable of the Cajun town makes it clear that the local which Hoover so energetically celebrates is not in fact small town ingenuity or self-determination, but instead the ability to follow Hoover's template for flood preparation and relief. The exemplary citizen here is the obedient citizen, eager to immediately accept the flood relief chairman's plan and enact it. Hoover values speed of compliance in the ideal refugee. As he says in his whistle-stop tour, "[Y]ou haven't got months to do it. You haven't got weeks. You've got hours." Hoover also demotes Main Streeters to mere muscle here. Certainly the townspeople can materially secure their own sanctuary; as Hoover's whistle-stop speech indicates, they are expected to build their own refugee camps and rough boats and enclose their own electrical plants. But in Hoover's account, locals are the brawn which construct material asylum, not the engineers of refuge. They do not conceive the plan for sanctuary. It is Hoover who provides the template for securing refuge. In the relief committee chairman's memoir, Washington plans while Main Street implements. This dichotomy creates two categories of Americans: the rescuers and the rescued. And in his account, Hoover willingly shoulders this burden of securing asylum not because inundation is impossible to escape, but because, according

to the dictates of both the hero-engineer and plantation fiction, the strong and expert must help the weak and ignorant.

The "lighter side" of the flood:

Living on the levee, sleeping on the ground.

Living on the levee, sleeping on the ground.

I will tell everybody that Greenville's a good old town.

--Alice Pearson, 'Greenville Levee Blues.'

After stripping Main Street of heroic status, Hoover also re-imagines flood refugees, beginning with an assertion that the victims of the Great Mississippi Flood are not after all protagonists of a disaster narrative. The relief committee chairman prefaces his vignettes of the flood with the observation that the disaster was not all drudgery. "But there was a lighter side to this job," he writes, as he begins a description of the flood's displaced people:

Of the people we had to move, about half were white small farmers and villagers, and half were colored. There was little hardship, as they were fed well, cared for medically, and entertained by movies and concerts. In fact, for many of them, this was the first real holiday they had ever known. There was little of tragedy and a wealth of good humor and human nature. (126-7)

This depiction of contended flood refugees takes the disaster out of natural disaster. Hoover's account makes the flood seem like a slumber party, or a snow day – an unexpected moment of leisure that allows for a temporary escape from the quotidian. Catastrophe is entirely elided here, as is any trauma resulting from the loss of home, livelihood and community. Hoover's description of the refugee camps evokes resorts rather than tent cities. Dispossession is rendered vacation here, as refugees enjoy "the first real holiday they had ever known" (Hoover 127). In Hoover's memoir, the flood refugees never had it so good. Not only are their basic needs met -- the refugees are "fed well" and "cared for medically" -- but they also enjoy some small luxuries. The refugee

camps provide more than the bare necessities of survival, as evacuees are also "entertained by movies and concerts." In addition to these resources, Hoover also describes the flood victims' state of mind: "There was little of tragedy and a wealth of good humor." In Hoover's account, then, victims of the Great Mississippi Flood are not only sheltered; they are also contented. Indeed, the relief committee chairman's excision of the deluge itself suggests that these flood victims aren't even refugees. They do not seek urgent shelter, and they do not flee for their lives. This insistence on the bright side – or, as Hoover has it, on “the lighter side” of disaster, is not peculiar to the Mississippi Flood or its relief committee chairman. Recalling Ronald Reagan’s conversion of the space shuttle *Challenger* explosion into a renewed commitment to technological advancement, Steven Biel notes, “Perhaps nothing marks a disaster as ‘American’ more than this ability to transform death and destruction into good news” (7). As we shall see, however, the transformation of disaster into “good news” is not uniquely American, but instead recalls the ancient, mythological association of flood with rebirth as is evident in the scriptural story of Noah’s Ark.

Hoover’s depiction of displaced flood victims anticipates Barbara Bush’s comments about Hurricane Katrina refugees. Touring a Houston arena filled with Katrina victims, the former First Lady remarked, “What I’m hearing which is sort of scary is that they all want to stay in Texas. Everybody is so overwhelmed by the hospitality. And so many of the people in the arenas here, you know, were underprivileged anyway. This is working very well for them.” While both Hoover and Bush represent refuge as a holiday, Bush is suspicious of this conversion. Her infamous comments imply that flood victims are sneaking up the socio-economic ladder – ascending during moments of crisis by virtue of the largesse of well-meaning white citizens. This suspicion constitutes a theory of cunning which is clearly raced. But it also reveals anxiety that there is a con inherent in charity, for Bush fears that the benefactor is inherently a gull. Asylum in this view is always a potential scam. Barbara Bush fears that control of the nature of refuge rests not with the benefactor, but with the shapeshifting refugee. Need is always suspect, she implies, because it can be faked. Thus unlike Herbert Hoover, Barbara Bush will countenance temporary sanctuary, but

not a vacation. For Bush fears that such hospitality will be converted into citizenship, and guests will become neighbours.

Hoover is not the only asylum provider who depicts flood refugees as contented vacationers. Poet and memoirist Will Percy recalls the Great Mississippi Flood in his best-selling memoir *Lanterns on the Levee: Recollections of a Planter's Son* (1941). The son of LeRoy Percy, influential senator and owner of one of the largest plantations in the Delta, Will Percy was made chairman of his local Greenville, Mississippi flood relief committee during the 1927 disaster. Like Hoover, he depicts flood refugees as leisurely holiday-makers:

The Negroes had behaved admirably during the first weeks of the flood. The camp life on the levee suited their temperaments. There was nothing for them to do except unload their rations when the boats docked. The weather was hot and pleasant. Conditions favored conversation. They worked a little, talked a great deal, ate heartily of food which somebody else had paid for, and sang at night. (264)

Percy's account is explicitly raced and vitriolic -- "ate heartily of food which somebody else had paid for" -- in a way that Hoover's is not. But both relief committee chairmen represent flood refugees as leisurely. Dispossession and evacuation are experienced as ease and comfort here, and the disastrous pre-condition of the flood itself is entirely divorced from the experience of the refugee camps. But these depictions of flood refugees as contented vacationers elide the historical reality of the disaster. Will Percy's own hometown of Greenville hosted one of the most egregious refugee camps in the 1927 deluge. The flood displaced over 600,000 Americans, and these internal refugees were in need of immediate shelter. To provide emergency accommodation, the Red Cross established refugee camps across the Mississippi river valley, which were run by local relief committees. While some of these camps successfully and fairly provided the urgently needed shelter, others devolved into a mockery of refuge. The most infamous violations took place in Greenville, Mississippi, a town twenty miles south of the catastrophic levee break at Mounds Landing. Greenville's levee gave way soon after the

Mounds Landing embankment, and when it did the water rose to “8 feet [of] dark, churning water...The currents poured into downtown, sweeping the streets empty...Virtually the entire county was under as much as twenty feet of water” (Barry 304, 306). Refugees from surrounding areas swelled Greenville’s population by thousands, while many townspeople themselves were already homeless. Levee camps were established to house refugees. Tents and makeshift shelters were erected on top of the levees – the town’s highest ground – to provide them with safe shelter until the floodwaters receded. Although the levees were elevated above the floodwaters, overcrowding and constant rain caused miserable conditions: “Two days after the Mounds Landing break, more than ten thousand refugees crammed the eight-foot-wide crown of the levee – in a line that stretched over five miles” (“Fatal Flood”).

This doubtful sanctuary was intended to be temporary. On 25 April 1927, steamers and barges gathered along the Mississippi River by Greenville in order to evacuate African-American refugees to higher ground at Vicksburg. The town’s flood relief committee, headed by Will Percy, voted for the evacuation despite fears that once they left, the refugees – who were largely sharecroppers – would not return, and the county’s plantations would be stripped of their labour force. As Will Percy recounts in his memoir, *Lanterns on the Levee*, his father, Senator LeRoy Percy, objected to the evacuation, and “suggested that if we depopulated the Delta of its labor, we should be doing it a grave disservice. I insisted that I would not be bullied by a few blockheaded planters into doing something I knew was wrong – they were thinking of their pocketbooks; I of the Negroes’ welfare” (257). Despite this resistance, Will Percy was outmaneuvered by his father, who convinced the relief committee to reverse its decision to evacuate. Instead, Greenville was refashioned into a Red Cross distribution hub, for which the supposed refugees served as forced labour. Once Greenville’s African-American population was denied egress to high ground, the refugee camp devolved into imprisonment and virtual peonage. In order to prevent the croppers from heading North – as part of the already established Great Migration – the Greenville relief committee authorized forced detainment of all labourers, in conditions which ranged from brutal to fatal. Flood victims were forced into camps patrolled by armed white men, and not allowed to leave until the planter who ‘owned’ them came to take possession. The

Greenville encampment thus became a literal concentration camp, designed precisely to keep African-American labour in the Delta.⁸⁶ And the disaster also became an opportunity to increase the croppers' debt: instead of simply distributing the free Red Cross rations, many planters sold the supplies at elevated prices, pocketing the profit.

While the specific criminal excesses of Greenville weren't repeated everywhere, the Colored Advisory Report discovered extensive abuse of African-American flood refugees. And there were consequences to this racialized oppression. The out-migration which Senator LeRoy Percy had so feared did indeed come to pass. As John Barry notes, the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 redefined the relationship between African-American sharecroppers and white planters: "[The flood]...shattered the myth of a quasi-feudal bond between Delta blacks and the southern aristocracy, in which the former pledged fealty to the latter in return for protection...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" (428, 417).

Hoover and Percy's depictions of flood refugees as contented vacationers clearly elide this historical reality of the camps. Greenville is the story these texts do not tell. This revision of the experience of the flood --its trauma and devastation -- is more than simply a failure of narrative imagination. It also rewrites the figure of the flood victim. And the minimization of the deluge transforms flood refugees from citizens desperately fleeing the worst natural disaster in American history into unserious children

⁸⁶ Levee camps were not an emergency phenomenon, established only when floodwaters threatened to burst their banks. Instead, as John Cowley outlines in his comprehensive "Shack Bullies and Levee Contactors: Bluesmen as Ethnographers," the levee camp was a Southern practice of forced labour dating from the antebellum period. This tradition is significant, as it influenced the character of the levee camps which were built to house the mostly African-American flood refugees in 1927. Ever since the French built the first Mississippi River levees in the early eighteenth century, the artificial embankments have needed constant maintenance – and workers to perform the grueling and dangerous labour. Slaves were put to work on the embankments by plantation owners who sought to expand the levee system and thereby the fields protected from flooding. After the Civil War and Emancipation, workers came from the convict lease system, a program of virtual slavery in which prisoners were leased to the state for levee construction and maintenance. Most of these convicts were African-Americans jailed for violation of Jim Crow laws. By about 1925, the convict lease program had been replaced with a system of peonage, in which white levee contractors, hired by the US Corps of Engineers who sought to outsource levee work, essentially owned African American and poor white workers (137). The conditions were brutal, racist and coercive; African American levee workers often lacked toilet facilities or refrigeration, were subject to at times lethal violence, almost endless hours of work, and price gouging at the 'company stores' (139-41).

mysteriously in need of protection. The elision of the scale of the event, of the sheer impossibility of self-rescue, serves to render the refugees dependents without a cause. Decontextualized here, stripped of the pre-condition of disaster, these no-longer refugees are rendered mysteriously helpless. These memoirs are thus curiously sanitized flood narratives: they depict refuge without urgency, and asylees without trauma.⁸⁷ The future president reifies the provision of asylum but elides the very conditions which make sanctuary so essential. The absence of refugees' voices, of accounts of the flood's ravages and the terror of disaster, results in a memoir of emergency management without the emergency. For the relief committee chairman's memoirs are not a disaster narrative - a genre which, after all, doesn't feature vacationers "entertained by movies and concerts" -- but plantation fiction (Hoover 127).⁸⁸

Hoover further accomplishes this generic conversion by excluding the voices of flood refugees. The relief committee chairman's memoir contains no first-hand accounts of flood victims, nor even second-hand recollections of the disaster's ravages.

⁸⁷ This elision of the flood's devastation also strangely minimizes the relief efforts themselves. Here American efficiency and heroism are not put to work to provide shelter for tens of thousands of desperate refugees. Instead, in the Relief Committee Chairman's account, the massive effort is not a vital rescue mission but rather the guarantor of a space of leisure. By eliding trauma, Hoover curiously minimizes his relief achievements.

⁸⁸ Despite his narrative elision of refugee suffering, Hoover was not in fact wholly unaware of the injustice of African-American life. Indeed, during the 1927 flood the relief committee chairman hoped to break the back of sharecropping through an ambitious program of land reform. In the wake of the flood, Hoover intended to redistribute foreclosed plantations, creating small plots of land suitable for farming and grazing. These homesteads – as well as necessary farm equipment, animals and housing – would be sold to former tenant farmers with the financial help of a privately funded resettlement corporation (Lohof 697). Under this plan the post-deluge delta's economy would be based not on feudal servitude but on small independent farmers. If successful, Hoover's strategy might at last have realized the Reconstruction-era promise of forty acres and a mule. Hoover recognized the scale of his proposal, and saw the 1927 flood as nothing less than "an opportunity to reconfigure southern society" (Leuchtenburg 69). But the plan did not succeed. The future president was unable to raise the private capital necessary to support his land reform strategy, and the proposal was abandoned. Hoover's memoirs do not even mention the program.

Hoover's Literary Plantation:

They don't need no band.
 They keep time by clapping their hands.
 Just as happy as a cow chewing on a cud,
 When the darkie beat their feet on the Mississippi mud.

--The Rhythm Boys, 'Mississippi Mud.'

The bulk of Herbert Hoover's account of the 1927 flood is comprised of a series of vignettes featuring apparently simple sharecroppers and townspeople who repeatedly prove themselves unable to grasp the modern, complex problems of disaster. It is these tales which comprise what Hoover calls the "lighter side" of disaster relief in the Great Mississippi Flood (126). The relief committee chairman's prefatory remark about the "lighter side" signals both a turn in the narrative's tone – from details of relief efforts to entertaining anecdotes – and a shift in genre. While this "lighter side" reflects Hoover's view of the flood refugees' experience, his remark also suggests that the sketches will be an entertainment for the reader. The "lighter side" of the flood, in a narrative sense, is an amusing series of anecdotes deployed for the reader's enjoyment. Here Hoover provides an interpretive guide to his flood memoir. And these anecdotes are intended to be pleasantly comic, for Hoover's vignettes are essentially plantation stories: tales of local colour and characters who reveal their naïve country ways to the sophisticated reader. In plantation fiction, the plantation functions as the locus of genteel, aristocratic rural life in the Old South. As an apology for slavery, the genre has both romantic and polemical registers (Grammer 65). Plantation fiction both laments the twilight of the already-fading world of the Old South, in which slavery is an insoluble problem, and openly resists racial equality as unnatural. In pursuit of its aims, plantation fiction often ventriloquises the slave, creating an attesting witness-narrator to the system of slavery. And this plantation subject is definitively dependent. Herbert Hoover's anecdotes evoke precisely these conventions. Flood victims speak and act in stylized ways here that serve not to represent individuals, but to enact the imperatives of the genre. In Hoover's memoirs, the traumatized subject of the flood narrative is replaced by the grinning, contented

dependent of plantation fiction. For Hoover's vignettes depict the 1927 flood in blackface. They constitute not African-American and Cajun experience, but an ideological representation of African-Americans and Cajuns.

When Hoover expounds on the "lighter side to this job" of flood relief, he begins by describing African-American evacuees. In Opelousas, Louisiana, Hoover asks a "benevolent old priest" who had been appointed to help run a hospital for 30,000 African American flood refugees if there had been any "trouble or excitement in the camp" (127). The priest replies "No trouble, but some excitement." He continues, "One of the colored sisters gave birth to triplets. She named the first Highwater, the second Flood, and the third Inundation" (127). Hoover follows this anecdote with another example of local colour in the 1927 flood, this one featuring the relief committee chairman himself. "An elderly colored sister was sitting on the bank," Hoover recalls, and he asked her, "Missus, why don't you go on up to the camp and get something to eat?" (127). She replied, "Mister, I jes wants to set and set on real ground" (127). These moments of "the lighter side" of flood relief are clearly intended to be comic. Hoover provides no commentary on these tales because the vignettes are assumed to speak for themselves. These anecdotes are assumed to be a transparently amusing reprieve both from the work of flood relief and the reading of Hoover's account of the Mississippi disaster. This mode of humour is typical of plantation fiction, in which the slave functions "as less the *teller* than the *butt* of his own jokes; his words and actions are funny to a more sophisticated white sensibility...A slave's misunderstanding, or at any rate, exotic way of seeing the world, produces laughter in the white audience" (Cowan 27). The woman who "jes' wants to set and set on real ground" is the only African-American who speaks in Hoover's flood memoir, and her voice is heard in the amusing anecdotes section of the narrative. In Hoover's memoir, then, African-American flood refugees function as mere comic relief: they do not articulate the experience of dispossession, but instead inadvertently attest to their own limited capacities. The mother of triplets, for example, doesn't understand what's funny about naming her children Highwater, Flood and Inundation. She doesn't know, as Hoover, the audience, and the "benevolent" priest are assumed to understand that you shouldn't name your children after a natural disaster. For Hoover, the gap between what the flood refugees know and what the author and his readers know is

precisely what makes this "lighter side" comical, for, as in plantation fiction, in Hoover's account the "source of the laughter is in the white man's feeling of superiority: African Americans are objects of entertainment" (Cowan 28).

But it's not only African-Americans whom Hoover depicts as plantation subjects. Cajuns are also represented in the same mode. And while Cajuns are not African-American, neither are they entirely white.⁸⁹ As Hebert-Leiter notes, Cajuns "shift in racial meaning throughout American literature, [and] coloring them white is a movement...that attempts to make their differences invisible" (160). This provisional whiteness of Cajuns does not imply equivalency. The Cajuns in Hoover's memoir are not slaves. They are not subject to the "social death" of slavery explicated by Orlando Patterson in his influential work. Neither, importantly, are the African-American flood refugees in Hoover and Percy's memoirs chattel slaves – although historians have asserted that sharecropping was virtual peonage, if not outright slavery.⁹⁰ Nor is this comparison between Hoover and plantation fiction drawn on the basis of the plantation's definitive system of labour. Hoover doesn't represent Cajuns and African Americans as unpaid workers. And Hoover's memoirs do not take place on the plantation -- that condensed metaphor of the genre. Rather, the grounds of the comparison between literary depictions of 1927 flood refugees and plantation fiction is ideological rather than historical. What Hoover reproduces in his memoirs are the subjects and social relations of the planter-slave dichotomy. And the reproduction of the plantation's social relations naturalizes dependency. In the literary plantation, race determines reliance, but in Hoover's memoirs, dependency is defined not only as racial and ethnic -- as African-American and Cajun -- but also by pre-modernity. The stereotypical depictions of the racial and ethnic other as natural man re-emerge in Hoover's memoirs, applied to the pre-modern subject.

⁸⁹ The racial taxonomy of the bayou is complex; Maria Hebert-Leiter explicates the distinctions between Cajun, creole, Creole and Creole of Color, observing that the "national bipartite racial system...conflicts with the Louisiana tri- or even quadpartite system" (3).

⁹⁰ Pete Daniel's *The Shadow of Slavery: Peonage in the South, 1901-1969* (1972) details this fine distinction.

Like Hoover's Cajun and African-American refugees, the slave-narrator of plantation fiction "not only... fulfilled local-color standards," but also "provided an air of veracity and more subtly a persuasive doctrine of master-slave relations" (MacKethan 218). In plantation fiction, then, the slave implicitly attests not only to his own need for slavery, but also to the planter's authority. The Creole surveyor's public rejection of Hoover's relief plan may be read as a subversion of this vision of willing dependent. For the surveyor grasps the power of public discourse and convinces the town to follow him, and this does not conform to the image of the innately reliant subject. Importantly, however, the surveyor is not the text's narrator. Hoover maintains the authority of the speaker in his fable of the doubting Cajun town, and therefore the power of interpretation. And ultimately, the Cajun surveyor and his town are humbled. After the townspeople refuse to prepare for the coming flood, the deluge arrives, as science and Hoover predicted it would. Having failed to move to high ground or build a fleet of boats, the residents are stranded in the midst of rising waters. Hoover himself rides into town to rescue the doubters: "[A] mob of terror-stricken people were standing as thick as bristles up to their ankles in steadily rising water...From the rear platform I called out that the water would probably rise more but to be patient, for we had a trainload of flatcars with boats following us" (129). Here the resistant Cajuns are revealed to be fatally dependent. Unable to secure their own asylum, they assemble at the train station to await rescue by the relief committee chairman himself. Conventionally, plantation fiction justifies slavery through the dramatization of slaves' inherent incapacity. This helplessness is racialized, and on the literary plantation, ventriloquised slaves obligingly enact this dependence. As a genre "that would convince us that African Americans are the natural dependents of whites," plantation fiction frequently depicts slaves as the "chief 'pendence' of helpless owners and unable, in most cases, to survive their expulsion from Eden" (Grammer 62, MacKethan 212). African-Americans' inability to exist beyond the gates of paradise – that is, slavery – serves to justify the peculiar institution. In this vision, slaveholders are transformed from commercial traders in human flesh to benign guardians of a feeble people.

African-American and Cajun flood victims are clearly minstrelized here because of their race -- no white displaced people are revealed as fools. Yet in Hoover's memoir

it is not only race which makes them wholly reliant. In the relief committee chairman's account, Cajun flood refugees mulishly defy progress, and it is this refusal of modernity that is the essential proof of their innate dependency and inferiority. The Cajun surveyor tells Hoover that his town won't flood because the past dictates the future: "There has never been a flood in this town, and there will never be a flood." Despite this assertion of faith in the past, the definitive failure of local history to secure asylum is writ large on the railway platform. For the hero-engineer, refuge is secured by "specifically modern forms of technological power and industrial management" (Stockton 813). It is the Cajun town's rejection of progress – their refusal to accept modern technologies of asylum – which makes them, in Hoover's account, fitting subjects for plantation fiction. Cajun doubters are anti-modern fools -- plantation subjects who try to make it on their own. And Hoover's depiction echoes "the stereotype formed in the nineteenth century [which] portrayed the Cajun as the alien brute of the bayou, unaffected by time and progress, wallowing complacently in...rural backwardness" (Henry and Bankston 171). As we will see, this depiction of Cajuns as dislocated from modernity is also evident in Faulkner's novella 'Old Man.' Faulkner's protagonist finds asylum in a Cajun's bayou shack, and the swamp's function as a pre-modern, primitivist sanctuary will be discussed in the next chapter's continuing analysis of the texts of the Great Mississippi Flood. Hoover's depiction of Cajuns, then, is typical of cultural stereotypes of the people of Evangeline as "lazy, uneducated and stupid" (Gaudet 79). But Hoover does more than reproduce Cajun cultural stereotypes in his *Memoirs*. Their complacent "rural backwardness" functions here as evidence of not just imperviousness but active resistance to modernity. Given Hoover's rejection of the past, his deployment of the inherently nostalgic plantation fiction is somewhat unexpected. His plantation stories of Cajuns and African-Americans do not mourn the end of slavery, as is typical for the genre, whose authors "were generically committed to an essentially elegiac view of their subject; their project was to describe a virtuous but vanishing world" (Grammer 62). Hoover's memoir is far from a sentimental lament for the romance of the aristocratic, gracious South and its institutions. Instead, the relief committee chairman's account inscribes not nostalgia for what is lost, but forbearance of those who cannot see the future. As is evident in the fable of the doubting Cajun town, it is the smug inevitability of the future regarding the past.

One of the characteristic acts of plantation fiction is the naturalization of slavery. Indeed, the literary plantation's "chief asset...is the claim its institutions make to the status of nature" (Grammer 67). Plantation literature does not reveal the origins of the plantation; the institution, the genre suggests, has no historical beginning, for "the hierarchies enshrined by the plantation system had been ordained by nature" (Grammer 74). Thus the plantation constitutes not a social practice, but an innate ordering of social and political power. This depiction renders slavery inescapable, for it is not designed by humanity but enshrined by nature itself. In an analogous ideological gesture, Herbert Hoover naturalizes technology in his *Memoirs*. The hero-engineer asserts not only that refuge is secured by technological means, but that those means are inevitable: "Our engineers had learned to time the advance of the flood accurately and to determine within a few feet the height that the water would reach at any point. That was a simple problem in hydraulics" (127). Such predictive ability is decidedly modern: it is definitively not the old knowledge of the Cajuns. And in Hoover's narrative, modernity is not a matter of faith, as the Cajuns would have it. Hoover reports that "100,000 Cajun farmers were difficult to deal with, "because "they had never been flooded. They would not believe that the water was coming, and most of them would not move either themselves or their livestock to high ground" (129). Although the flood relief committee initially tried to convince the disbelieving Cajuns to relocate, eventually all such attempts at persuasion or coercion were abandoned. "I concluded a Cajun would only move," Hoover recounts, "when the water came up under the bed" (130). The hero-engineer is untroubled by such recalcitrance, for regardless of belief and history, science is unfailingly proven right: "We arranged for the Navy air patrol to be ready, and upon their reports the rescue boats would be sent out. Jean-Baptiste had a worrying time. The water reached most of them during the night" (130). Modernity's promise is inexorable here, and utterly displaces local custom. Thus the relief committee chairman indulges the folk beliefs of his "foolish" dependents, for, regardless of Cajun history, the floodwaters come. In Hoover's memoir, then, the Cajuns attest to their own anti-modernity. They are living proof of the inability of locals to secure their own asylum. Providing sanctuary falls to the able, who are defined not only by race here, but also by benevolent technological capacity. In doing so, Hoover naturalizes technology, as the definitive discourse of the hero-engineer is

rendered ahistorical. No longer a product of the specific turn-of-the-century era, in which construction techniques allowed for higher buildings and public works marvels, technology is instead rendered eternal here.

Having re-imagined Main Street and flood refugees, Hoover's memoir also re-defines the asylum provider. In another echo of plantation fiction, in his memoir Hoover emerges as the literary planter. He notes, for instance, that the relief committee abjured the use of force. The doubting Cajuns are not compelled to leave their homes; "rather than cause bloodshed," Hoover recalls, "we abandoned that idea" (129-30). Instead the relief committee chairman readies rescue operations for even those who endanger themselves despite technological warning. Hoover is a characteristic planter of plantation fiction here, a "generous, unmaterialistic gentleman whose paternalistic relation to his slaves constituted an honourable, inescapable obligation" (MacKethan 210). On the 1927 Mississippi Delta, although the plantation is inundated, the master is not unseated but merely replaced. Hoover is the new planter in the flood-ravaged landscape. Thus despite the flood narrative's imperative of a new beginning, and despite Hoover's faith in the innovative, technological provision of refuge, his memoir re-inscribes the power relations implicit in plantation fiction. The relief committee chairman's celebration of progress has other generic implications as well. His zeal for the modern technocracy of refuge rewrites the disaster narrative itself. Flood here is transformed from an unforeseen act of God to predictable, containable event. While the divine – or nature – still holds the power to unleash floodwaters, the ability to surprise is extinguished. In Hoover's memoir, it is scientific prediction, and not natural disaster, which is granted the status of the inexorable. Inevitability is now the purview of the relief committee chairman, rather than the divine. In Hoover's vision of asylum, humanity does not merely endure catastrophe but manages it.⁹¹ Hoover is not in awe of nature's power, but secure in his own. Thus Hoover replaces Yahweh in this model – it is the relief committee chairman who warns of the coming flood, and who offers sanctuary not to a chosen few, but to the masses. As Grell notes of the transformation of natural disaster from a pre-modern to a

⁹¹ Arthur Schlesinger Jr. commented on Hoover's insistent conversion of exploits into efficient bureaucracy. Comparing the relief effort chairman to foreign correspondent and adventurer Richard Harding Davis, Schlesinger notes, "[Hoover] transmuted all adventure into business, as a Davis hero would transmute all business into pleasure."

modern phenomenon, "science has replaced the Bible and science God in most narratives of disaster in the twenty-first century" (26). The traditionalist Cajun townspeople, then, depend not only on obsolete knowledge, but also on an archaic model of the human subject. Hoover defines flood refugees according to a distinctive vision of the relationship between nature and humanity. Technology, he believes, has rewritten human power. No longer meek victims of disaster, humans now create their own refuge. Asylum is no longer what it was for Noah -- a zone of protection from a disaster which cannot be averted or mitigated. No longer the cleft in the rock which shelters humans from divine power, refuge now pushes back the borders of the safe space. Thus Hoover's re-vision of the disaster narrative not only redefines American asylum, but also the relationship between humanity, nature and the divine.

President Coolidge's State of the Union: From natural disaster to national catastrophe

Lord, the whole round country, Lord, creek water is overflowed.

Lord, the whole round country, man, it's overflowed...

Boy, you can't never stay here.

I would go down to Rosedale, but they tell me it's water there.

--Charley Patton, "High Water Everywhere Part 1"

While Herbert Hoover's emergency management of the Great Mississippi Flood expanded the bureaucracy of American refuge, in no less public a medium than the State of the Union address President Calvin Coolidge guaranteed sanctuary as a legitimate function of the federal government. He did so against his own wishes and political philosophy, for Coolidge resisted federalizing the Mississippi River disaster. While he appointed Herbert Hoover quickly after the catastrophic levee breaks at Mounds Landing, Coolidge was committed to restricting Washington's role in flood relief. Thus while he campaigned for private donations to the Red Cross, the president did not visit the flood zone. In Coolidge's view, "[r]escue was work for the state governments," and although politicians from the affected region petitioned for extensive federal aid, Coolidge resisted

these claims, asserting "rescue, yes; reconstruction, no" (Shlales 358, 360). There was extensive precedent for this policy. During a drought in Texas, then-president Grover Cleveland vetoed a federal relief bill, and when a yellow fever epidemic struck Louisiana, Teddy Roosevelt refused to provide federal funding without state guarantees. In 1927, the model of natural disaster as a local problem was also reflected in government bureaucracy: "No special federal agency yet existed to cope with such emergencies, and indeed, Americans had only begun to conceive of direct federal disaster relief. Traditionally, private citizens and businesses either survived or died without outside help" (Clements *Hoover* 373). The 1927 Mississippi flood was so disastrous, however, that the public conversation soon extended beyond questions of relief to the larger issue of prevention. Wary of establishing a model of federal responsibility for future disasters, Coolidge initially refused to endorse national flood control legislation. The proposed legislation would essentially centralize responsibility for the lower Mississippi River, and involve a massive infrastructure project. Coolidge also had other concerns about federal flood control; he "feared that appropriation was being larded up with giveaways and that southern corruption would prevent the funds from reaching their intended beneficiaries" (Greenberg 135). Ultimately, however, the president capitulated. The final bill "had a price tag of \$500 million, and placed responsibility for future flood control in the hands of the Army Corps of Engineers " (Sobol 317). The president did manage to impose a caveat which restricted aid to the worst affected areas, thus ameliorating his concerns that federal aid would be subject to Southern corruption. Nevertheless, the president was so displeased with the final legislation that he refused to attend a public ceremony and instead signed the bill in private in May 1928.⁹²

Given this political context, Coolidge's 1927 State of the Union address is a balance of imperatives: the president insists here that local communities bear part of the cost of flood aid, but also acknowledges the federal government's role in disaster relief. While Hoover enacts a federalization of asylum, Coolidge's State of the Union address proclaims it national policy; in this way Hoover constitutes the action of refuge and

⁹² Amity Shlales' *Coolidge* (2013) and David Greenberg's *Calvin Coolidge* (2006) both recount in detail the negotiations surrounding the flood relief bill, as does John Barry's *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How it Changed America* (1997).

Coolidge the rhetoric of sanctuary. Together, they enact a compromised, halting, and yet undeniably federal recognition of asylum. Coolidge's State of the Union address acknowledges this shift:

It is necessary to look upon this emergency as a national disaster...If the sources directly chargeable cannot meet the demand, the National Government should not fail to provide generous relief. This, however, does not mean restoration. The government is not an insurer of its citizens against the hazard of the elements. We shall always have flood and drought, heat and cold, earthquake and wind, lightening and tidal wave, which are all too constant in their afflictions. The Government does not undertake to reimburse its citizens for loss and damage incurred under such circumstances. It is chargeable, however, with the rebuilding of public works and the humanitarian duty of relieving its citizens from distress.

Coolidge here both delimits and expands government responsibility for the citizen in distress. This speech reads like a careful parsing of obligation – a precise delineation of what the federal government will and will not cover. Coolidge first asserts that, like the poor, natural catastrophe will always be with us. He then essentially rejects the role of national insurer, and by asserting that acts of God cannot be indemnified, the president insists that citizens must accept and bear risk. There is no protection against the hazard of simply living, and the government will not reimburse citizens for that which is lost to nature's fury. Coolidge will rescue Americans stranded in their attics, feed and clothe them while the flood waters still rage, and when those waters finally recede rebuild bridges, roads, and schools, and provide them with seeds. However, he will not write a cheque to cover all lost property, homes and livestock. While life and limb will be insured, property will not. Asylum extends thus far: Americans will not be allowed to succumb to the moment of disaster. But once the immediate crisis passes with the flood waters, citizens are left to their own devices. Asylum is then essentially depoliticized and amnesiac here; it is apparently unaware of the wide and long history of dispossession which characterizes both the Delta and the plantation system.

Coolidge's insistence on the limits of government responsibility is so thorough that it may disguise the fact that this speech does indeed expand the role of public asylum. Despite its many caveats and qualifications, Coolidge's State of the Union address asserts that the national government has a role in disaster relief. In stark contrast to Herbert Hoover's rhetorical emphasis on the indomitable Main Street, President Coolidge highlights the gap between local ability and local need: "If the sources directly chargeable cannot meet the demand, the National Government should not fail to provide generous relief." This acknowledgement that refuge is a national responsibility, and one which must be met by the national government, is significant, regardless of the many provisos which Coolidge subsequently imposes on his claim. In this speech – and indeed in the \$30 million dollars of aid the government provided for 1927 flood relief – the President expands the definition of refuge beyond the purely voluntary, local and charitable. In Coolidge's State of the Union address, asylum is rhetorically nationalized. In 1927, the "mere idea that the federal government should exercise primary responsibility in a disaster of this magnitude was an important precedent" (Clements *Conservation* 114). Breaking with the nation's past policy of natural catastrophe relief, the extraordinary destruction of the Great Mississippi Flood altered the practice and discourse of American asylum, so that in decades to come, George W. Bush's infamous flyover of the flooded delta during Hurricane Katrina would be read as a betrayal of presidential responsibility. Coolidge's speech constitutes a rhetorical origin -- not a singular moment but a vital one -- for the expectation that refuge is a national phenomenon: that citizenship guarantees asylum. As John Barry notes, the 1927 flood "reflected a major shift in what Americans considered the proper role and obligations of the national government" (407).

Coolidge goes on to justify his relief effort spending and definition of national disaster through reference to sentiment and good faith: "The people in the flooded area and their representatives have approached this problem in the most generous and broad-minded way. They should be met with a like spirit on the part of the national government." Coolidge invokes a sense of honour here; he suggests that the federal government should reciprocate because the local people have done their part – have been "generous" and "broad-minded" – this last is possibly a coded reference to the voluntary

kindness of white Americans helping African-Americans. Such good faith efforts to solve “the problem” must call forth a similar response by the people at large; indeed, Coolidge suggests that the local response *obliges* the federal response. This is not Herbert Hoover’s language of efficiency. Instead, Coolidge insists that the generosity of the Mississippi delta should be met by the federal government with a “like spirit.” Here the President struggles to articulate the basis of national asylum – to express a bureaucratic policy in affective language. This is essentially the rhetoric of sentiment – of “generosity” and “broad-mindedness” and “like spirit” – and of reciprocity, benevolence, and mutuality. And it is predicated on a vision of one nation, unified, and not on states’ rights. Thus it is a claim for federalism, and one which asserts that asylum must be a national project. Thus sentiment and federalism are linked here, in the language of fraternal likeness.

Backwater Blues: Asylum as Sacrifice in 1927 Flood

Back water rising, come in my windows and door.
 The back water rising, come in my windows and door.
 I'll leave with a prayer in my heart, back water won't rise no more.
 --'Rising High Water Blues' by Blind Lemon Jefferson

Delimiting asylum is a political battle for Calvin Coolidge, who sees the Great Mississippi Flood as "a test of federalism" (Shlales 357). But the provision of refuge is not always limited to political battles. In 1927, efforts to secure asylum for some placed others in positions of radical vulnerability. During the Great Mississippi Flood, some Americans were sacrificed in order to assure the refuge of others. Both as the river raged and after its waters finally receded, American asylum often functioned as a zero sum game in which refuge for the few was purchased by the forfeit of the many. The backwater at Caernarvon, Louisiana is one such a historical moment. During a deluge, levees are often breached. A natural break in the levee – a place where flood waters

break through or overtop the embankment – is called a crevasse. At times, however, levees are deliberately breached in order to reduce strain on the main channel and to protect communities further downriver. These human-made crevasses are known as backwaters, and the 1927 flood's most notorious backwater occurred in Louisiana. The city of New Orleans – located at the mouth of the Mississippi – had long feared catastrophic flooding: “After the 1922 flood the chief of the Army Corps of Engineers had advised the New Orleans financial community that, if the river ever seriously threatened the city, they should blow a hole in the levee” (Barry 222). This advice was based on the theory that a backwater outside the city would relieve the massive pressure of the Mississippi River, hemmed in by levees and raging towards the sea. The business community took this advice to heart, and during the 1927 flood a committee of private citizens – the aristocratic money men of New Orleans – advised state and federal governments that in order to protect the Crescent City, they planned to dynamite a downriver levee at Caernarvon, a community in St. Bernard Parish. The backwater would flood the bulk of two parishes – Plaquemines and St. Bernard – which were both largely working class. These counties boasted none of New Orleans' elite social and financial institutions, but were instead populated by fishermen, trappers, and another kind of commercial power – “the largest sugar refinery in the world...[and] one of the largest bootleggers in the South” (Barry 234, 235). Many of these residents were Cajun and Islenos -- descendents of the Spanish Canary Islanders who used to rule Louisiana. The parishes contained a large amount of swampland, which would allow the excess water from the explosion to drain into the Gulf of Mexico. As Barry notes of the association which lobbied for the backwater, “They had the power of panic. They had the power of money. They had the power of caste. They had the power of the times, when it was believed that men with money not only knew better than others but acted better” (245). Both residents and some flood management experts vigorously resisted the plan; one city engineer declared the backwater “hysterical,” asserting that New Orleans was not in mortal danger and that a break at Caernarvon would in any case fail to successfully protect the city (Barry 245). But these objections fell on deaf ears, and on 29 April 1927, after evacuating 10,000 residents, the Caernarvon levee was blown, and both

Plaquemines and St. Bernard's Parishes flooded.⁹³ The New Orleans decision makers promised to "compensate all victims for all losses" but they reneged on this pledge, and after the backwater, the residents of the flooded parishes were simply abandoned by their putative benefactors (Barry 244). John Barry concludes that the backwater at Caernarvon was merely a "public relations effort emphasizing the safety of New Orleans" – particularly the financial safety – and that the "destruction of St. Bernard and Plaquemines was unnecessary. One day's wait would have shown it to be so" (254, 258). As the levee was dynamited, Sheriff L.A. Meraux of St. Bernard declared, "Gentlemen, you have seen today the public execution of this parish" (Barry 257).⁹⁴

For some, sacrificial refuge such as the backwater at Caernarvon was the only way to occupy the role of asylum provider. While President Coolidge is reluctant to take on this role, in Hoover, Irwin and Percy's accounts, the provision of asylum was racially codified. Hoover and Percy in particular depicted securing refuge as a white man's burden -- as the obligation of the strong to the weak. In *Lanterns on the Levee*, Will Percy defines African-Americans as definitive recipients of sanctuary, extolling white Mississippians' provision of refuge, and deploring black indolence:

⁹³ The first attempt at blowing the levee was unsuccessful; the April 29 dynamiting created only a small breach in the embankment, and so on May 3 a diver planted the explosives which tore an enormous hole in the Caernarvon levee and flooded St. Bernard and Plaquemines.

⁹⁴ Backwaters are not just a historical curiosity. In the spring of 2011, the Mississippi River was once again in flood. As the floodwaters rose and advanced southwards, Americans debated the decision to open spillways -- part of the flood management infrastructure built in the wake of the 1927 deluge. One *New York Times* headline encapsulated the dilemma: "Officials in Louisiana Face Dilemma: Bad Flooding, or Worse." With the Mississippi River at record levels, the choice was not between disaster and averting disaster, but "[b]etween bad flooding in one part of Louisiana, or potentially catastrophic flooding in another" (Robertson). Commentators argued that refusing to open spillways endangered not only the densely populated cities of Baton Rouge and New Orleans, but also the many oil refineries and chemical plants in the Mississippi River corridor. Yet the decision to breach the river containment system was far from unanimous; when the Army Corps of Engineers decided in April 2011 to blow up several levees in Missouri, they encountered fierce local resistance. Chris Koster, Missouri's attorney general, tried – and failed – to convince the Supreme Court to overrule the Corps' decision, arguing that it would sacrifice too much for uncertain gain. This was not the first time Koster was openly critical of planned breaches. In the flood season of 2009, Missouri's attorney general objected to another levee explosion proposed by the Army Corps of Engineers, saying "We're risking the lives and livelihoods of Missourians for what may turn out to be a phantom...The Corps has no idea whether the rise helps...in any way, but the Corps does know the risk the rise creates here in Missouri...The benefit may be non-existent and is not worth the risk" (Koster). Despite such resistance, levees were blown and spillways opened, and thousands of acres of rural America were flooded.

For four months I have struggled and worried and done without sleep in order to help you Negroes. Every white man in this town has done the same thing. We served you with our money and our brains and our strength...We white people could have left you to shift for yourselves. Instead we stayed with you and worked for you, day and night. During all this time you Negroes did nothing, nothing for yourselves or us. (267)

Percy races asylum here: whites provide it, and blacks need it. While more overtly racialized than Hoover's memoirs, both men depict flood refugees as definitive recipients of sanctuary. And it is precisely this depiction which novelist and preacher Sutton E. Griggs counters in his sermon 'Saving the Day.'⁹⁵ On 18 September 1928, in Memphis, Tennessee, Reverend Griggs recorded the short sermon which recounts a community's desperate attempts to prevent a levee burst during a Mississippi River flood.⁹⁶ After a dramatic description of the gathering floodwaters, Griggs catalogues failed attempts to contain the river.⁹⁷ In a notable subversion of the discourse of techno-modernity, "skilled engineers" are the first group who cannot prevent the levees from faltering. They are

⁹⁵ Recently, Griggs has been the subject of renewed critical interest. Much of this scholarly attention is focused on his fictional work rather than his sermons, and particularly on *Imperium in Imperio* (1899), a novel which is often read within the context of African-American utopic thinking. Examples of this scholarship include Giulia Fabi's "Desegregating the Future: Sutton E. Griggs' *Pointing the Way* and American Utopian Fiction in the Age of Jim Crow"; Kali Tal's "That Just Kills Me: Black Militant Near-Future Fiction" and Pavla Vesela's "Neither Black Nor White: The Critical Utopias of Sutton E. Griggs and George S. Schuyler."

⁹⁶ 'Saving the Day' was not the only recorded sermon of the 1927 flood. In February 1927, Reverend J. M. Gates recorded "Noah and the Flood," a sermon which although not directly inspired by the 1927 flood, was understood within the context of the disaster. And in January 1928, Moses Mason recorded a homily explicitly commenting on the 1927 deluge. "Red Cross the Disciple of Christ Today" extols the virtues of Red Cross efforts in Greenville, Mississippi -- where Will Percy was head of the local Red Cross relief effort. Mason compares the organization to the parable of Christ and the loaves and fishes, and makes no mention of the abuses which occurred at Greenville. David Evans notes that it's unclear whether this elision indicates that Mason was one of the preachers who was "ready to support the white authorities in return for their patronage" or was genuinely impressed by the work of the Red Cross (49).

⁹⁷ In his survey of blues and gospel music born of the 1927 flood, David Evans concludes that Griggs' sermon was inspired not by the 1927 disaster but by events which took place during the 1912 Mississippi River deluge. Nevertheless, Griggs's sermon was likely understood by his congregation and listeners as a commentary on the much more recent disaster. Griggs preached "Saving the Day" not long after the 1927 disaster, and he does not specify a particular deluge in his homily, but simply refers to a Mississippi River flood in "modern times." This reception history, in which historical context shapes popular interpretation of a text, also influenced one of the most famous American river texts. *Show Boat*, the hit musical by Kern and Hammerstein, opened in New York on 27 December 1927. Although its signature song, 'Ol' Man River,' was not inspired by the Mississippi disaster, because the musical opened so soon after the deluge, the tune "was widely interpreted in connection with the flood" (Evans 16).

quickly followed by “the state and federal government,” who struggle ineffectually to “meet the situation,” and finally by “citizens from the surrounding regions,” whose efforts to sand bag the weakening embankment are entirely futile (160-1). As each succeeding group fails, hope fades, and the levee begins to give way. At this point of maximum danger -- and maximum narrative suspense -- Griggs introduces a fourth group: “a band of Negroes” (161). It is these African-Americans – and not the engineers and local citizens of Herbert Hoover’s memoir – who are the heroes of Griggs’s disaster narrative: “In the twinkling of an eye, a band of Negroes offered their bodies as temporary sand bags. Wedging their forms into the break, they formed a human wall, and at the imminent peril of their lives, held the furious waters in leash until sand bags could be rushed to the break. And thus the day was saved” (161).

Like Herbert Hoover's memoir, Griggs’s sermon constitutes a fantasy in which asylum can only be secured by a singular mode. The final line of 'Saving the Day' – “And thus the day was saved” – could also serve as the concluding declaration of Hoover’s fable of the doubting Cajun town. Indeed, these texts both depict an idealized provision of refuge, and as such are didactic. But while the texts share formal elements, they fundamentally diverge on identity of the asylum provider. Technological expertise – the savior of the relief committee chairman's account – fails immediately in Griggs’s text. “Skilled engineers” are revealed as incompetent here (160). And they do not fail simply in the moment of emergency, for Griggs assures the reader that the engineers “had spent the full force of their judgment in the *construction* of the levee” (160). In a subversion of the early twentieth-century rhetoric of the hero-engineer, then, 'Saving the Day' indicts technocracy; engineers are inadequate to the tasks both of designing infrastructure and of emergency recuperation. Immediately following this failure, the government and local people unsuccessfully attempt to prevent the looming crevasse. Thus local ingenuity and expertise – the putative and actual heroes of Hoover's flood memoir -- are rendered promptly and decisively inadequate in “Saving the Day.” This is a remarkable reversal in itself of the hero-engineer narrative. But Griggs does not merely depose Hoover’s saviors. In his sermon, the preacher transposes the disaster narrative hero: the sermon’s saviors are the memoir’s burdensome victims. In doing so, Griggs resists the depiction of African-Americans, so evident in Hoover's *Memoirs* and Percy's *Lanterns on the Levee*,

as exemplary victims. The "band of Negroes" are neither dependent nor a childlike drain on resources. Not a problem to be solved during a time of crisis, Griggs's African-Americans are no longer the beneficiaries of refuge: they are its guarantors. By placing their bodies in the breach, the "band of Negroes" shifts the depiction of disaster refugees. African-Americans are the protagonists of Griggs' disaster narrative, and not the helpless victims.

Griggs's sermon further counters Hoover and Percy's characterization of African-American flood victims by explicitly aligning the "band of Negroes" with the scriptural "priests" who deliver the nation of Israel to safety. 'Saving the Day' takes as its text Joshua 3:17, a verse which describes the safe passage of the ark of the covenant through the Jordan River. Griggs explicitly compares the Israelites' journey with "the salvation wrought in modern times in a river by a group of Negroes" (160). In Joshua, the levitical priests bore the ark of the covenant ahead of the Israelites into the River Jordan. As the priests walked into the waters, the river stood still. They then remain on the bottom of the miraculously dry riverbed while the entire nation of Israel passes safely to the other side. Griggs's "band of Negroes" – and by extension all African-Americans – are elevated here through comparison to scriptural antecedents. Rexford Tugwell, in his radio address 'What Should America do for the Joads?' makes a similar gesture when he equates government camps with manna, the sustenance God provides to the Hebrews during their journey through the desert. By invoking the stories of Exodus and Joshua, Tugwell and Griggs link migrant farmers and flood refugees with God's chosen people. Notably, in the book of Joshua the priests guarantee safe passage for an entire nation. Likewise, in Griggs's sermon, the "band of Negroes" saves everyone who lives beyond the faltering levee -- black and white alike. The volunteers' heroic action saves not merely themselves but an entire community. The scale of this salvation is elevating, and thus stakes new ground for African-Americans in the disaster narrative.

But the mode by which asylum is secured is decidedly different on the Mississippi River than it is on the River Jordan. Nor does 'Saving the Day' reaffirm the mode of refuge deployed in Herbert Hoover's *Memoirs*. It is not only the act of securing refuge which is consequential here, but the means by which asylum is assured. In Griggs's

account, refuge is accomplished not through modern technology but through the corporeal. In an entirely low-tech solution, the body of the African-American is made heroic here. Intimately embodied, these human sandbags do not merely perform a heroic act but are themselves asylum extant: "In the twinkling of an eye, a band of Negroes offered their bodies as temporary sand bags. Wedging their forms into the break, they formed a human wall, and at the imminent peril of their lives, held the furious waters in leash until sand bags could be rushed to the break. And thus the day was saved" (161). In 'Saving the Day,' asylum is secured through African-American corporeality. Although volunteers, "the band of Negroes" constitute objects which ensure the safety of others, and thus are sacrificial. Indeed, 'Saving the Day' climaxes with African-American self-sacrifice, and once that sacrifice is made, the sermon ends. The reader does not learn the fate of the "human wall," although Griggs's characterization of the "band of Negroes" as "temporary sand bags...until sand bags could be rushed to the break" implies that the volunteers do survive the flood (161, emphasis mine). Nevertheless, the ambiguous fate of the human sand bags is suggestive. It implies that they have served their purpose, and their narrative usefulness is concluded. As Tracy notes, the volunteers' "willingness to sacrifice their lives to save lives and crops seems an effort to prove their 'nobility'... This heroic action involves the self-sacrifice of some blacks to save everyone else" (165, 166).

This sacrifice is ideologically complex. 'Saving the Day' grants African-Americans subjectivity in that it depicts a moment not of sacrifice, but of *self*-sacrifice. Choice converts the "band of Negroes" into heroes rather than victims. But African-American agency here is exercised *only* as the willingness to self-sacrifice.⁹⁸ As Tracy notes, in this act the "burden of proof, of being worthy of the respect of whites, resided with blacks who could treat themselves as inanimate objects (sand bags), [and] aid those who denied them safety and equality" (166). In "Saving the Day," Griggs is as willing as Will Percy to depict African-Americans as an obstruction. But for Griggs, African-Americans are the impediment which secures asylum by holding back the floodwaters. In Percy's view, they merely obstruct recovery from the deluge. Although both authors

⁹⁸ Tracy notes that Griggs was criticized by some of his contemporaries for "accommodationist leanings"; Robert Bone's *The Negro Novel in America* and Robert E. Fleming's 'Sutton E. Griggs: Militant Black Novelist' analyse Griggs' racial politics and his "vacillation between militancy and accommodation" (Tracy 159).

view African-American flood victims as obstacles, Griggs rewrites this corporeality as heroic. In doing so, however, the preacher participates in the racialized ideology of African-Americans as exceptionally embodied, and implicitly accepts the view of African-Americans as overly determined corporeal beings. African-American self-sacrifice is the climax and the conclusion of the brief sermon. The volunteers step forward only in the last three lines of the text, while the majority of the homily is spent establishing the crisis. Immediately after the "band of Negroes" offer themselves up as sandbags, the sermon concludes with the line, "And thus the day was saved" (161). In this final sentence Griggs tells his audience what the sacrifice means. We are to read the human sandbags as the means by which the day was saved. This structure forestalls readerly interpretation. Sacrificial action is abruptly followed by declarative meaning and conclusion. Debate over the meaning of the volunteers' actions is foreclosed by the sudden ending of the text.

'Saving the Day' is a re-writing of yet another text -- this one of a historical event. The flood story Griggs recounts is based in a historical event, and a *New York Times* article of 11 April 1912 -- "Human Dike Used to Hold Back Flood" -- tells the story very differently. As David Evans notes, the most significant deviation between the news report and the preacher's sermon is that of coercion. In the 1912 event, the African-American men did not "[offer] their bodies as sandbags," but were instead press-ganged (Griggs 161). Griggs's heroes first appear in the sermon after all other attempts at rescue fail. Indeed, the "band of Negroes" seems to materialize out of thin air, as Griggs recounts, "in the twinkling of an eye....And thus the day was saved" (161). This pseudo-magical description lends the African-Americans an almost supernatural quality, and recalls Will Irwin's description of Hoover on the Melville levee: "Hoover touched flood-relief with his magic hand...bringing order out of chaos" (310). Like Hoover, the "band of Negroes" are represented as the disaster narrative's hero-exemplar. They arrive just in the nick of time, as if conjured by desperate need and narrative urgency -- the *deus ex machina* of 'Saving the Day.' In stark contrast, the *Times* report strips the rescuers of these dramatic magical qualities and describes them instead as mere resources: "The young engineer in charge had a brilliant idea and proceeded to put it into execution. Calling to several hundred negroes, who were standing idle, he ordered them to lie down

on top of the levee and as close together as possible. The black men obeyed.” In 'Saving the Day,' African-Americans deploy *themselves* as sandbags. While they are materially determined in Griggs's sermon, they are also autonomous -- although only within the strictures of racial hierarchy. But the *Times* report elides even this vexed act of courage and emphasises instead the tolerance and good-nature of the human sandbags:

"[A]lthough spray frequently dashed over them, they prevented the overflow that might have developed into an ugly crevasse. For an hour and half this lasted, the negroes uncomplainingly sticking to their posts, until the additional sandbags arrived. Then the human wall was replaced." This is a conventional portrayal of the 'good Negro': uncomplaining, passive, and long-suffering. Converted from "idle" to useful by the "brilliance" of the presumably white engineer, the disaster narrative is cast in conventional terms here, with a Hoover-like protagonist. A racial dichotomy is established, pitting white, expert, brilliant, and commanding against black, raw material, idle, and obedient. The *Times* article re-inscribes the iconic hero-engineer, the singular figure who both has "a brilliant idea" and "puts it into execution." The conflation here of concept and implementation embodies the rhetoric of the technocrat, for whom, like Hoover standing on the Melville levee in Irwin's *Reminiscent Biography*, all materials are simply an extension of the great man. In the *New York Times* article, the African-American men do not transcend this embodiment as object, but rather exemplify objectification.

In 'Saving the Day,' Griggs re-writes the disaster narrative. By casting African-Americans in the role of asylum securer, Griggs re-imagines the genre itself, transposing the conventional roles of provider and recipient. In this sense, 'Saving the Day' subverts the national narrative of sanctuary and its implicit racialized hierarchy. Just as in Herbert Hoover, Will Irwin and Will Percy's accounts, Sutton E. Griggs' disaster narrative constructs the nature of refuge itself. In contrast, Richard Wright's 1927 flood stories question the disaster narrative's capacity to tell sharecropper's story at all. In his narratives of the Great Mississippi Flood, it is not asylum provision which is racialized, but refuge itself, which Wright suggests is not only provisional, but simply absent.

Chapter 3

'No more water, but fire next time':

Drowning Noah's Ark in the Great Mississippi Flood

We can't plant no cotton, can't raise no corn.
Our house got washed away, and we ain't got no home.
Now I'm gonna sing 'Mississippi Low-Levee Blues.'
--"Mississippi Low-Levee Blues," Barbecue Bob

While visiting a levee camp during the Great Mississippi Flood, Robert Moton overheard African-American refugees singing of how "the flood had washed away the old account." The chairman of the Colored Advisory Commission -- a board established to investigate abuse of black refugees -- Moton reported that the asylees "felt that the flood had emancipated them from a condition of peonage" (Evans 10). In his review of blues and gospel music inspired by the 1927 flood, David Evans suggests that the song Moton heard was "The Old Account Was Settled Long Ago," a spiritual which the Fisk Jubilee Singers recorded during the 1927 flood (10). Although "The Old Account" long pre-dates the 1927 disaster, old spirituals took on a new valence in the context of the Mississippi catastrophe. Many African-Americans saw the flood as "a sign of God's wrath against the sins of man, just as in the time of Noah. The flood had wiped the slate clean and cancelled all old debts. The Delta was now a new land" (Evans 9). The lyrics of "The Old Account" embody this hope: "Yes the old account was settled long ago (hallelujah)/ And the record's clear today cause He washed my sins away/ And the old account was settled long ago." This view of the flood as a historical re-beginning is characteristic of the disaster narrative. In the story of Noah's Ark -- Western culture's ur-disaster narrative -- catastrophic flooding constitutes not only destruction but also

renewal. For the survivors of the Great Deluge were protected by a new covenant, in which God not only promised "[n]ever again will I curse the earth because of man," but also bound Himself to "every living creature of every kind that is found on the earth" (Gen. 8.21. 9.17). In this covenant, the ark becomes a rainbow, and Noah is replaced by "every living creature of every kind" (Gen. 9.16). Asylum is no longer exceptional, but universal. Liberated from what Giorgio Agamben calls "bare life," creation is now sheltered by divine vow. In the Great Deluge humanity thus escapes both its own corrupt past and also the peril of a genocidal God. In the Noachian model, as in many subsequent disaster narratives, then, asylum assures freedom. In later catastrophic accounts, such as Puritan and slave narratives, refuge constitutes escape from religious oppression and political tyranny. This depiction of natural catastrophe as an ultimately liberating force "refuses to let disaster have the last word" (Jabir 661). Like Tom Joad's dream of agrarian refuge in *The Grapes of Wrath*, "The Old Account Was Settled Long Ago" defines asylum in expansionist terms. For the flood refugees singing the old spiritual, asylum not only constitutes sanctuary from raging floodwaters but also ends the peonage of sharecropping. In this model, asylum is extended beyond emergency levee camps to the ancient promise of re-beginning.

But many texts of the Great Mississippi Flood belie this view of cataclysm as guarantor of liberty. As Steven Morrison notes in his analysis of downhome blues songs inspired by the 1927 disaster, for some singers and composers, the deluge did not represent the new account. Instead, Morrison points to "the permanence and finality that the singers infuse into the lyrics [of these songs]. The persons and families in the narrative are not temporarily relocated but completely displaced...each escapee in these songs will become a person without a place" (275). In "Rising High Water Blues" (1928), Blind Lemon Jefferson sings of this totalizing dispossession: "Children sadly pleading, 'Mama, we ain't got no home.'/ 'Oh, mama, we ain't got no home.'/ Papa says to children, 'Back water left us all alone.'" Flood then is not always redemptive, but sometimes simply disaster without a second act. In contrast to "The Old Account," many texts depict catastrophe without asylum, and Noah's flood without the ark. Contemporary scholarship echoes this view of natural disaster as dispossessing, and rejects the notion that flood and storm are discrete events which equally affect all those unlucky enough to

live in their path. Rather than viewing catastrophe as a temporary deviation from a normative state of non-disaster, social vulnerability scholarship argues that for many dispossessed people daily life is a permanent cataclysm. In his analysis of Richard Wright's flood text "Down by the Riverside," James Edward Ford III explores the possibility of escape from such foundational inequity. Ford asks, "Can the social conditions that make some people more vulnerable to disaster than others be altered rather than systematically reproduced?" (408). For the protagonists of the disaster narratives under discussion in this chapter, the "old account" is not washed away. Asylum does not result in liberation -- from debts either economic or moral. But while Ford frames the question of unfreedom in terms of social determinism, this chapter will analyse the literary model of liberating disaster.⁹⁹ Delving further into the texts of the Great Mississippi Flood, then, this chapter considers not the accounts of asylum providers but instead disaster narratives which recount the experience of refuge. For unlike the asylum seekers represented in Herbert Hoover's *Memoirs* and Will Percy's *Lanterns on the Levee*, Wright and Faulkner's flood refugees are not contented vacationers but instead definitively unfree. In William Faulkner's "Old Man" (1939), the protagonist is a literal inmate. Incarcerated in Parchman Prison, he is put to emergency relief work outside the prison walls during the 1927 flood, but nevertheless throughout the text is known only as the Tall Convict. While Richard Wright's "The Man Who Saw the Flood" (1937) doesn't feature a literal prisoner, the protagonist is a different kind of captive. Enslaved to the peonage of sharecropping, Tom's account was decidedly not "settled long ago," but is instead an inescapable burden. And in "Down by the Riverside," (1938), Brother Mann's agency is brutally subverted, as he is press-ganged into levee work and ultimately shot to death as he tries to escape. In these texts, the sharecropper is not so different from the convict. Indeed, Richard Wright asserts that blackness is co-incidental with unfreedom: "Mississippi is only an immense black ghetto," the author declared, "a vast prison where

⁹⁹ In recent years, "Riverside" has been read through the lens of Hurricane Katrina. Critics view both the 1927 and 2005 catastrophes not as natural disasters, but as revelations of socio-economic inequity. Terrence Tucker's "(Re)Claiming Legacy in the Post-Civil Rights South in Richard Wright's 'Down by the Riverside'" and Ernest Gaines's *A Gathering of Old Men*," Anthony Dyer Hoefler's "'They're Trying to Wash Us Away': Revisiting Faulkner's *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem [The Wild Palms]* and Wright's 'Down by the Riverside' After the Flood," and James Edward Ford III's "'Down by the Riverside': Race, Class, and the Drive for Citizenship," all connect "Riverside" to Hurricane Katrina, and emphasize the unnaturalness of both catastrophes.

the whites are the jailers and the Negroes are the prisoners” (202). In these accounts of the 1927 flood, disaster is not prologue, but the text itself. Trial by water does not lead to redemption, and destruction does not augur the space of refuge. Instead, "Down by the Riverside" and "The Man Who Saw the Flood" declare refuge unreal -- a literary convention rather than material reality. Wright and Faulkner's subversion of the disaster narrative is illuminated by comparison with the scriptural account of Noah's Ark, which functions as the literary and theoretical model for the catastrophic genre.

Noah's Ark: The Ur-disaster Narrative

The water is rising, people fleeing for the hills.
 Lord, the water will obey if you just say 'Be still.'
 -- 'The Flood Blues,' Sippi Wallace

When the floodwaters rose during the Great Mississippi Flood, many Delta residents took shelter in their attics. Seeking the highest ground she could reach, one woman was trapped for three days before rescue finally arrived. When asked why she hadn't evacuated, she answered, "I didn't know it was going to be no Noah's Flood" (Briggs 28). This invocation of the Great Deluge to explain a contemporary flood is both compelling and widespread. For, as Stock and Stott note, the "verbal or visual representation of a disaster -- no matter whether it would be categorised as 'fiction' or 'non-fiction' -- adopts and adapts long-established discourses and employs modified but recurrent motifs, conventions and strategies" (11). The story of Noah's Ark is a particularly influential model for later accounts of catastrophe. Western culture's ur-disaster narrative, the Noah story is the text which informs and indeed defines the genre.¹⁰⁰ The outline of the

¹⁰⁰ The great deluge is in fact a world myth and not only a Western narrative; it appears in the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the Sumerian *Eridu Genesis*, the Quran, and in almost countless other mythologies including Greek, Norse, Incan, Mayan, and Hindu traditions. Claus Westermann identifies 302 ancient narratives of destruction by deluge, noting that the tale appears in Egypt, Asia, India, Europe, North and South America, and Polynesia, among many other cultures. Despite this ubiquity, however, the tale of a catastrophic flood is not homogeneous. There are significant variations between these stories: in some accounts the destruction is universal, while in others the flood is localized; the number of survivors ranges from none to many; and the cause of the deluge is various – God's wrath as in the Noah story, but many

story is familiar: angered by the venality of the world, God decides to destroy his creation. "I regret having made them," Yahweh says of the earth's inhabitants (Gen. 6.8). Noah -- the only righteous man -- is the sole exception to the coming annihilation. Commanded by God to build an ark which will shelter him, his family, and a male and female of every living creature, Noah obeys. The flood comes, and it rains for forty days and forty nights, ridding "the earth of every living thing" (Gen. 7.4). Months later, after the floodwaters had begun to subside, the ark lands on Mount Ararat. Noah immediately builds an altar and offers a sacrifice to Yahweh, who is moved to make a covenant with his people. "Never again will I strike down every living thing," God promises, and gives Noah and his descendents dominion over the earth and all its creatures (Gen. 8.21). This vow is marked by a rainbow, which God sends as a sign of his covenant "between myself and every living creature of every kind that is found on the earth" (Gen. 9.16).

In the story of the Great Deluge, what comes after the flood is definitively different than what comes before. And this distinction is not merely metaphorical, but also textual. The Book of Genesis is divided into primeval and ancestral sections; Genesis chapters 1 to 11 describe the creation of the universe and humanity through to the dispersal of nations at Babel by way of the Flood. In contrast, Genesis chapters 11 to 50 are ancestral; these chapters tell of the patriarchs and the long begetting history of the post-Noah generations.¹⁰¹ Noah himself is thus read as an "epoch divider": "He is the father of the new era...whose offspring are going to repopulate the entire world after the Flood. [Noah] is a bridge between the quasi-mythological history [of the primeval chapters] and a more humanly accountable history [of the genealogy chapters]" (Anchor, 1123). Noah is both of the past and of the future, and marks a shift in tone from the mystical to the determinedly earthly. The flood itself is thus a demarcation. What comes before is distinguished from the disaster's aftermath, and this rhetoric of the unprecedented, of the disaster as marking a new era, is a key and influential element of the Noah story.

other explanations exist as well: a war between gods, or an offense against an animal. Lloyd Bailey recounts some of these inter-textual differences among flood stories in *Noah: The Person and the Story in History and Tradition* (1989).

¹⁰¹ This reading of the Great Deluge is drawn from the texts of American Protestantism, using major biblical commentaries, dictionaries and critics.

The story of Noah and the Ark opens with imminent destruction; God decrees that “everything on earth must perish...for corrupt were the ways of all flesh on the earth” (6:17; 6:12). Yet the text does not end with the devastating flood, or even with Noah’s survival. After the deluge recedes, and the survivors embark on Ararat, God makes a new covenant with humanity. The scriptures emphasize the novelty of this covenant – the chapter in which it occurs is entitled “A new world order.” Newness is key to the disaster narrative: it is what lies beyond the flood waters, the fire or the drought. It is the reward for survival – the measure of suffering. And this rebirth, which constitutes a fresh promise between God and his people, is also a re-telling of the original scriptural creation myth. God echoes the language of the very first Genesis story in His new covenant. He tells Noah’s family and the ark animals to “go forth and multiply,” using the same phrase with which He dispatched the very first animals, those He created on the sixth day (9:1-2, 9:7, 1.28). In the characteristic act of the flood narrative, creation re-begins here. The flood has wiped the slate clean and allowed for a fresh start, for “in sending the Flood God aims not only at punishing the guilty but at purifying the polluted earth” (Cohn 16). While the deluge is catastrophic, it is not the end of the story. Instead, after the waters dissipate, the survivors are cleansed and new life, free of the old imperfections, becomes possible. In this sense, then, the post-diluvian landscape is always a New Eden. As Teresa Cid notes of river mythology, it “infuses [the flood] with the capacity to bring about an absolute (re)beginning for history” (199). The Noah story in particular is a model of catastrophic renewal, and this motif has been influential. In *Common Sense* (1776), Thomas Paine declares of the American Revolution, “We have it in our power to begin the world over again. A situation similar to the present hath not happened since the days of Noah until now. The birthday of the new world is at hand, and a race of men...are to receive their portion of freedom.” Here Paine articulates the discourse of catastrophic renewal, in which the Great Deluge functions as a marker of rebirth rather than near annihilation. And, significantly, he also asserts that this re-beginning of “the world over” will produce “freedom.” In this passage Paine makes explicit a consequential aspect of the disaster narrative: the notion that the genre produces a liberated subject. In “Common Sense,” Paine takes the Noah story as a model for revolutionary liberty.

Catastrophic regeneration is the definitive trait of the disaster narrative. The power of cataclysm to make a new and better world -- this link between destruction and rebirth -- is evident beyond the flood itself. Noah's first act upon reaching dry land is to build an altar and offer a burnt sacrifice (8:20). And it is the sensate experience of sacrificial flesh that spurs the new covenant: "Yahweh smelled the appeasing fragrance [of the burnt offering] and said to himself, 'Never again will I curse the earth because of man...Never again will I strike down every living thing as I have done'" (8.21). It is the corporeal experience of ritualized destruction which sparks the divine promise of restraint.¹⁰² This correlation between blood and renewal, between deluge and rebirth, is enacted both in Noah's sacrifice and Yahweh's covenant. In this sense the ur-disaster narrative ends optimistically. The destroyed earth is not abandoned, but once again made fecund, in the promise of "the renewal of mankind through Noah and his descendants" (Oxford "Genesis," 46). In disaster narratives, the great promise of cataclysm is the new life it creates. Thus while catastrophe conventionally devastates the landscape, disaster narratives are also accounts of perfectability. The genre has faith in the aspirational possibility of betterment through suffering and sacrifice.¹⁰³ As we will see, this impulse is also evident in Dave Eggers' *Zeitoun*, a text which recounts the disaster of Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent levee breaks. Catastrophe then is both destruction and redemption, for it constitutes the re-imposition of order even in the moment of disaster.

Noah is the singular exception to the flood: his is the only righteous man. However, it is not merely the fact of Noah's singularity but its nature that is significant. The survivor's exceptionality is not random, for the text insists that Noah is not marked out for mercy through whim or fancy. Instead, Noah is spared because of his goodness. God declares, "you alone among this generation do I see as a good man" (7:1). Biblical commentary echoes this characteristic and repeatedly refers to Noah as the "exemplary

¹⁰² This pattern of destruction and renewal is geological as well as symbolic; it is the recurrence of flood and retreat which creates the rich soil of the Mississippi delta and indeed the so-called 'cradles of civilization,' such as the river valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates.

¹⁰³ In the American context, the story of Noah has also functioned as a defense of slavery. Based on Noah's post-flood curse of Ham's descendants, as Stephen R. Haynes notes, nineteenth-century pro-slavery texts often "cite the story (as both a biblical justification for slavery and an historical account of slavery's introduction in the post-diluvial world), but do not relate or analyze the tale beyond quoting from it."

righteous man" (Lewis 9). It is this blameless virtue that makes Noah exceptional -- were he not so good, he too would have drowned in the deluge. Notably, then, this first flood is not an 'act of God' in the contemporary sense, which implies that disaster is no one's fault. The Great Deluge is the result of wickedness, for the "earth grew corrupt in God's sight, and filled with violence" (Gen. 6.8). Yahweh announces its meaning: it was sent to cleanse the world of the wicked. And this "hermeneutics of morality that sees natural disasters as God's penalty for the disobedient" endures in contemporary disaster narratives (Jabir 659). This overt didacticism is key to the disaster narrative, in which cataclysm makes sense. In the Noah story, catastrophe has meaning. Later disaster narratives similarly recount the moral of the flood, asserting that the cataclysm signifies something -- whether divine displeasure, human wickedness, or the dominance of the technocrat.¹⁰⁴ The linkage in the Great Deluge between Noah's virtue and survival is one instantiation of this signification. For although natural disaster was classically viewed as both divine punishment for sins and a warning to repent, catastrophe also had another valence (Grell 39). Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Protestants viewed historical floods through the lens of Noachian exceptionalism. Natural disasters were seen "as a confirmation that they were indeed God's chosen people" (Grell 39). The very fact of survival, then, functions as proof of divine favour. To have lived through catastrophe which claims the lives of many others legitimates the survivor's singularity. By implication, those who die are definitively un-chosen. This causal relationship between

¹⁰⁴ This convention of the disaster narrative endures. Pat Robertson -- controversial Christian evangelical, broadcaster and former candidate for President -- suggested that Hurricane Katrina was God's judgment on America for legalizing abortion: "I was reading, yesterday, a book that was very interesting about what God has to say in the Old Testament about those who shed innocent blood. And he used the term that those who do this, 'the land will vomit you out.'... And this author of this said, 'well 'vomit out' means you are not able to defend yourself. But have we found we are unable somehow to defend ourselves against some of the attacks that are coming against us, either by terrorists or now by natural disaster? Could they be connected in some way?" This notion of catastrophe as divine retribution for sin has extended beyond natural disaster and into terrorism. On a September 13, 2001 telecast of 'The 700 Club,' a right-wing Christian television program, Jerry Falwell, a controversial evangelical Christian televangelist, said, "God continues to lift the curtain and allow the enemies of America to give us probably what we deserve...the ACLU's got to take a lot of blame for this...The abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked. And when we destroy 40 million little innocent babies, we make God mad. I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People For the American Way -- all of them who have tried to secularize America -- I point the finger in their face and say "you helped this [September 11 attacks] happen." Pat Robertson, who was speaking with Falwell at the time, replied, "I totally concur."

morality and survival echoes through later disaster narratives, and the link between endurance and virtue forms the archetype of the deserving survivor.

Noah's singularity is emphasized by Yahweh's rhetoric, and his exceptionalism is accentuated by the mercilessness of God's destruction. The text insists upon the totality of Yahweh's wrath. As God proclaims to Noah, "The end has come for *all* things of flesh...I will efface them from the earth...destroy *all* flesh, *every* living creature under heaven; *everything* on earth shall perish" (6.13-17; emphasis mine). Given the scope of the annihilation, that which comes after is miraculous simply by its very survival. And this exceptionalism is defined by asylum. It is Noah's ark which sets Noah apart from all other people, which excepts him and his family from destruction, for the "Genesis ark appears as a functional representation of a sanctuary" (IVP. 'Flood,' 322). Without the ark, Noah dies in the floodwaters with all other living things. Early Protestants viewed the ark as both material and spiritual refuge; one Calvinist pamphlet showed thousands drowning in the rising water, but "hope of rescue and significantly salvation remained," for the sketch also depicted "the Ark of Noah sailing unharmed through the flood" (Grell 30). This notion of the ark as a place of refuge endures. In Faulkner's "Old Man," the Tall Convict seeks shelter from the floodwaters on an Indian Mound with the unnamed woman and her infant child.¹⁰⁵ He briefly steps away to fetch water for his companions, and as he returns, the Tall Convict sees that darkness has fallen. The Indian Mound, he thinks, is like "that earthen Ark out of Genesis," a place where "darkness too had taken refuge" (481). It is sanctuary – the ark itself – which redeems the Great Deluge. Without this refuge, the flood is an act of total destruction which permits no human survivors. Thus Noah's singularity both emphasizes God's supreme power and his mercy. Because of the ark, the ur-disaster narrative is an account of sanctuary as much as of destruction.

Although the flood story is known as Noah's Ark, Noah himself is an ambivalent protagonist. For Noah's "chief virtue was unquestioning obedience...he initiates almost no independent actions" (Piehl 41). Noah's obedience is a key aspect of his character. Jonathan Edwards' sermon "The Manner in Which the Salvation of the Soul is to be

¹⁰⁵ Indian Mounds are remnants of pre-European contact. Built of earth, rock, shells and debris, the mounds served burial and ritual purposes, and are extant all over the United States.

Sought" comments on the obedience of the flood hero. Taking as his text the line "Thus did Noah; according to all that God commanded him, so did he," Edwards uses the Noah story to urge the unconverted to undertake for themselves the great work of salvation. Comparing Noah's physical toil with spiritual labour, Edwards asserts that "there must be a constant devotedness, in a persevering way, as Noah was to the business of the building the ark, going on with that great, difficult, and expensive affair, till it was finished, and till the flood came." Balancing the Puritan doctrine of election with the need for conversion, Edwards reminds his congregation, "Men are not saved on the account of any work of theirs, and yet they are not saved without works." This work is not just any effort, but that which "God commanded," as the Genesis account indicates. Noah's toil is meaningful because it is what he was directed to do, just as God has told the Puritans to redeem their souls through active conversion. The protagonist of the flood narrative, then, is Yahweh himself: "God is the chief actor in the flood drama...God destroys the wicked and saves Noah's family. God makes the waters subside and promises never to destroy the world by water again...When God has all the active parts in the drama of a religious story, the only role left for a human is that of respondent" (Piehl 49-50). It is Yahweh who exercises agency in the story of the Great Deluge, while Noah enacts obedience. As a literary model, the Noah story is thus ambiguous, for it complicates the role of the protagonist-hero. Yahweh both causes the flood and provides sanctuary. How to represent agency in a genre which is predicated on such an act of God? Herbert Hoover manages this literary problem by casting himself as the hero-engineer saviour of the Great Mississippi Flood. This conflation of Noah and God, refugee and asylum provider, endows the protagonist with agency and is one method of resolving the problematic heritage of the vexed flood hero.

As is evident in the Noah story, the disaster narrative is a categorical genre. It decisively divides new from old, good from evil, clean from unclean, worthy from undeserving, and life from death. A morality play that banishes ambiguity and ambivalence, as a genre, the disaster narrative is bifurcated. For while the Great Deluge creates a new world, the old tale continually creeps in. In its chronicle of the ecstasy of destruction, the disaster narrative celebrates the sheer potentiality of rebirth, of the shedding of the old skin, old society, and even old kin. But even as the Noah story lays

claim to utter newness, it returns to the past. For the new world must be defined against the old: the annihilated order is the standard against which newness is measured. And as its account of creation is a reiteration -- a repetition of the first Genesis creation -- it is by its own logic vulnerable to another flood, to another divine impulse of destruction. In such a potential new cataclysm, Noah might not be the only good man, but just another sinner relegated to death by water. This eeriness -- the uncanny potentiality of repetition -- would render the new world fatally exposed were it not for the covenant. But the covenant itself stands without complication for only a few lines. This fresh beginning is compromised when, immediately after making the covenant, Noah is found drunk and naked in his tent. Ham -- one of Noah's sons -- witnesses his father's nakedness, and when Noah learns of this violation, he curses Ham to be his brothers' slave. Noah of the tent is not the Noah of Ararat; indeed, "the story of Noah's drunkenness can hardly be seen as related to that of the Flood" (Oxford 47). Nevertheless, mere lines after the new covenant is struck, the new world begins to resemble the old. This suspicion that God's covenant is provisional is echoed in the African-American spirituals 'O Mary Don't You Weep' and 'God Gave Noah the Rainbow Sign.' These songs revise the story of the Great Deluge by adding another line to Yahweh's promise that "the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all things of flesh" (Gen. 9.16). As 'Rainbow Sign' declares, "God gave Noah the rainbow sign/ No more water, but the fire next time."¹⁰⁶ These lyrics invoke a technicality in which God could destroy the world through conflagration rather than deluge and still keep his post-flood promise. 'Rainbow Sign' does not however abandon hope for refuge, but calls on God to provide sanctuary: "Tide me over, Rock of Ages, cleft for me... East and West the fire will roll/ Hide thou me (hide thou me)." This rhetoric of asylum as hiding place recalls the Puritans, who depict the New World as a "cleft in the rock" divinely crafted to protect God's chosen people (Winthrop). But in 'Rainbow Sign,' this sanctuary is necessary because God's wrath might once again turn against the earth and destroy all living things. It is this shadow story of Noah's flood that complicates the conventional disaster narrative's equation of flood with rebirth. Richard Wright's "The Man Who Saw the Flood" subverts this convention and in doing

¹⁰⁶ James Baldwin took this line as the title of *The Fire Next Time* (1963), two essays about race and religion in America.

so exposes the ways in which "political discourse about so-called natural disasters has often combined biblical narratives of just retribution with racist ideologies" (Jabir 660).

“The Man Who Saw the Flood”

Heaven's angry, someone's done some wrong.
 Oh, heaven's angry, someone's done some wrong.
 Trouble is spreadin', been rainin' too doggone long.
 --James Crawford, 'Flood and Thunder Blues.'

Richard Wright deliberately set "The Man Who Saw the Flood" during a deluge. "I decided to use a flood," Wright says, "to show the relationship between the two races in the South at a time of general tragedy" (122). "Flood" tells the story of Tom, an African-American sharecropper who returns to his cabin following a flood.¹⁰⁷ With his wife May and daughter Sally, Tom surveys the damage and begins to pick through the remains of the flooded shack, reassembling a few belongings. Soon Mr. Burgess, the planter, arrives, and refuses to forgive any of the family's debt, despite the disaster's devastation of any hope of economic recovery. Tom considers abandoning sharecropping and running away, but both May and Mr. Burgess insist that escape is impossible. The story ends with Tom reluctantly getting into Mr. Burgess's wagon, symbolically accepting his virtual slavery. The text at first cues the reader to expect a realist story, perhaps a variant of regionalism. The use of dialect, simple syntax, and uncomplicated adjectives all establish this generic expectation. The story's first lines include simple adjectives such as "black," – used three times – "muddy," "thin," "skinny," and "mud-caked" (82). Each noun is modified by only a single adjective, thus keeping the syntax uncomplicated. The subject matter is an unromantic depiction of a rural setting. As in the Noah story, a devastating flood has caused apparently irrevocable destruction. And yet this moment of ruin is leavened by potentiality. Wright echoes the scriptural story of creation here with uneasy symbols of rebirth: "Over the stark fields came a gusty spring wind. The sky was

¹⁰⁷ There is little sustained criticism on "The Man Who Saw the Flood." The story is typically read briefly as a plot point in the larger arc of the collection – *Eight Men* – in which it appears.

high, blue, full of white clouds and sunshine. Over all hung a first-day strangeness” (82). The depiction of “spring” winds -- a meteorological calm after the storm -- and the explicit invocation of a Genesis-like “first-day” suggest that “The Man Who Saw the Flood” is a conventional disaster narrative. Catastrophe passed, recovery may begin. History is not destiny, this symbology implies. A new wind is blowing, and while it blows over a ravaged landscape, it still brings a new day. Spring, the season of ecological and Christian re-birth, promises translation. Like Noah, Tom is another man who saw a flood and still lives. Having survived, new birth can't be far behind. For in the Great Deluge, God wipes the slate clean and starts anew with Noah on a flood ravaged landscape, in a re-beginning of history. The family's domestic recuperation similarly echoes this promise, and this generic familiarity takes hold as the family enters the house and discovers two essential elements for human life: fire and water. Renewal seems possible – even inevitable – as May realizes that the stove still functions, while Tom finds the pump in working order. These two literally elemental discoveries spark momentum, and Sally quickly finds more basic tools -- an axe and spoons. These are symbols of cultivation: an axe to cut back the wilderness and create the mythical clearing, and the spoon – a utensil that elevates eating beyond mere survival. While the family can eat without utensils, the spoon is a sign of civilization, of manners and refinement order. Emboldened by these items, May declares that she'll begin to clean the cabin, implying a decision to stay. To this point, the family has made no commitment to remain in their ruined home, and this first visit to the cabin is staged as a reconnaissance mission to assess damage. Thus the decision to clean is the first clear indication that the family is staying and not simply scavenging for salvageable remains: “Ahma git a bucket an start cleanin,” said May. “Ain no use in waitin, cause we’s gotta sleep on them floors tonight” (84). One does not clean what one plans to abandon. As May begins washing, Tom discovers his plow, and Sally finds tobacco and matches on a high shelf, miraculously untouched by the flood waters. Tools of cultivation, matches to start a flame, and the small pleasure of tobacco – which was also a major crop in the Delta -- the family begins to gather civilization out of the mud of catastrophe. In this narrative arc from post-flood devastation to the re-assembling of order, "The Man Who Saw the Flood" resembles another element of the Noah story. In the Great Deluge, the flood constitutes a reversion

to chaos, in which soil and ocean are undifferentiated: “the waters are no longer held in check by the firmament as they burst through the dome of the sky, and the dry land is no longer sep from the seas” (Eerdmans 44). The ark's arrival on the dry land of Mount Ararat, in turn, represents a return to an ordered universe, in which distinctions hold. Tom and his family engage in similar acts of distinction here. They separate tools from refuse, and categorization once again imposes sense on undifferentiated debris. From the wreckage of the storm, the families of Noah and Tom begin again. To this point in the story action gathers slowly, and the spurt of energy which accompanies these discoveries differs from the enervated stillness of early paragraphs in which the family simply witnesses the flood's devastation. As night falls, the family has begun to reclaim the cabin. May starts the stove and boils water, they light a lamp and stand together on the front porch, talking while Tom smokes some of the found tobacco.

But just as the domestic tableau begins to reassemble itself, to look like a story we know, the conventions of the disaster narrative are violated. For while there is a catastrophe in this text, it's not the titular flood. Wright does not narrate Tom's encounter with the flood itself, but only with its aftermath. Unlike the Noah story or “Old Man,” then, this text is not an account of the struggle to survive the raging floodwaters. It is a different kind of disaster narrative. The catastrophe which Tom witnesses is not the swollen Mississippi, but the economic and social enslavement of the sharecropper-planter dichotomy. In this story, the family is swept under by the overwhelming force of economic dispossession. As Tom says, “Ef we keeps on like this tha white man'll own us body n' soul...I don wanna make no trouble. But this is jus *too* hard. Ahm worse off now than befo” (85, 86). In this moment, Tom “correctly assesses the power of the white man to compound the devastation of natural destruction” (Carson 304). And it is this human disaster from which the family cannot recover. Even before the flood, Tom owes Burgess the enormous sum of eight hundred dollars. It is this economic flood from which the family cannot recover. There is neither amelioration nor escape, for the “ruthless peonage of sharecropping provided black and poor white farmers with a glimpse of independent income...that effectively immobilized them in the face of the rising tides of

debt” (Hoefler 542).¹⁰⁸ The fixed nature of this oppression is made damningly clear when Tom asks Burgess to forgive part of his debt, given the destruction of the sharecropper’s means of making a living. The planter refuses, saying “You ate that grub, and I got to pay for it, Tom” (86). Tom and his family are trapped here by the most basic biological requirement: the need for food. Even this fundamental human need is bent to the service of enslavement. Tom’s family is entrapped by biology here. They can no more escape slavery than they can survive without nourishment. Sally’s plaintive cries of hunger serve as reminders of this biological imperative. May replies to her daughter’s declaration of appetite by reminding Sally, “Yuh et this mawnin” (84). The small domestic detail of a child’s sweet tooth is also rendered grotesque, as Sally’s simple request for something sweet will put her family further in debt, since it too must be bought on credit. The “lasses” the girl pleads for is thus not an affirmation of the endurance of family life, or the resilience of children, or the resurgence of the norm. It is instead a yoke around Tom’s neck, and around May’s and Sally’s, too. In the aftermath of the flood, the family has no food, and Tom only agrees to get in the buggy when Burgess promises him sustenance: “Get in the buggy and come with me. I’ll stake you with grub” (86). Tom stands still, thinking it over, and then silently acquiesces: ““Well,” asked Burgess. “You coming?” Tom said nothing. He got slowly to the ground and pulled himself into the buggy” (86). Tom accedes with his body, here, but not with his voice, and in doing so, he “reveals as much of his altered state of mind as he dares” (Howard 59). In a brutal subversion of the Noah story, the paternal figure who controls the land here makes no exceptions. Tom is not Noah, and there is neither ark nor rainbow in Wright’s text. The retreating floodwaters do not herald a new covenant and Yahweh’s vow that “shall be no flood to destroy the earth again” (Gen 9.11). In “The Man Who Saw the Flood,” disaster is not at an end. Burgess refuses to provide any relief, and catastrophe is no harbinger of mercy. Instead, the flood continues, despite the absence of the floodwaters themselves.

The possibility of asylum and the freedom it provides is denied throughout the text. Tom wants to leave the Delta, but both Burgess and May tell him such escape is

¹⁰⁸ Pete Daniels details the inequity of sharecropping in *The Shadow of Slavery: Peonage in the South, 1901-1969* (1990).

impossible. As Tom himself acknowledges, “Ef we try ter run erway they’ll put us in jail...Ah’d leave here ef Ah could” (84, 85). Confirming the impossibility of escape, Burgess assures Tom that when two other sharecroppers tried to run away, “I had to have the sheriff pick em up” (87). This assertion of the inexorability of dispossession constitutes a satire of agrarianism. It is not nature which cannot be escaped here. Although the floodwaters upend the permanence of daily life – of familiar objects in their familiar places – what cannot be upended is the plantation system. Here Wright ironically subverts the eternality of idealized agrarianism evoked in Yahweh's poetic vow on Mount Ararat: "As long as the earth lasts,/ sowing and reaping,/ cold and heat,/ day and night,/ shall cease no more" (Gen. 8.22). After the Great Deluge, God promises that the earth's rhythms will remain inviolate. Never again will the divine disrupt seasonality, converting the earth to an endless floodplain. But in "The Man Who Saw the Flood," economic extortion is unending rather than the changeless rhythms of nature. Thus, despite the flood's devastation, “while the natural disaster altered the Mississippi landscape, the Mississippi social system remained intact” (Howard 52).¹⁰⁹

The flood is not simply destructive but also transformative. While some objects are lost in the deluge, few are totally demolished. Many of the family’s possessions are instead altered, and household objects have become grotesqueries here. When the family first enters the cabin, it is replete with gothic symbols:

The cabin had two colors; near the bottom it was a solid yellow; at the top it was the familiar gray. It looked weird, as though its ghost were standing beside it...[Inside] the floors swam in ooze. Like a mute warning, a wavering flood mark went high around the walls of the room. A dresser sat cater-cornered, its drawers and sides bulging like a bloated corpse. The bed, with its mattress still on it, was like a giant casket forged of mud (83).

¹⁰⁹ The notion that the inherently exceptional natural disaster reveals the norm is also true in a sociological as well as literary sense: “Catastrophic disturbances of routine actually tell us a great deal about the ‘normal’ workings of culture, society, and politics...[T]he imagining of a disaster becomes a contest between the defenders of the established ways and those for whom the disaster lays bare the injustices, inequities, or inefficiencies rather than the beneficence of the status quo” (Biel 5,6).

The family encounters conventional gothic images of “a bloated corpse” and “a giant casket” in their ravaged cabin; these ghostly echoes were once the familiar domestic items of a dresser and a bed. As Freud notes, “the uncanny is that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once known and had long been familiar” (124). The family’s home is not rendered wholly strange here, but is instead both familiar and foreign; its doubled nature now embodied in a two-tone appearance – the upper section of the cabin remaining “the familiar grey” while the lower shingles are newly coloured “a solid yellow” by flood waters and silt (83). And the cabin’s doubled appearance is troubling: “It looked weird, as though its ghost were standing beside it” (83). It is both familiar and unfamiliar, as objects not absent but transmuted function as malformed, distended versions of their former selves. A dresser looks like a “bloated corpse,” and the bed “was like a giant casket forged of mud.” The family’s furniture symbolizes death here. Dresser and bed represent the lethal nature of the family’s life. And this deadliness is not malformation but revelation. The floodwaters do not distort but expose the family’s circumstances. When the floodwaters retreat, the cabin looks like what it is: not a humble home, with smoke curling cozily out of a stovepipe, and a family, dressed in shabby but clean clothes on the porch. Instead, the deluge takes with it the veneer of domestic life and reveal a bloated, uncanny ghost of a life. Post-flood, the cabin matches the economics of sharecropping, and the ugly, mis-formed parody of freedom which Tom cannot escape. The domestic, then, is the opposite of refuge here, and the flood constitutes a mockery of the cleansing waters.

And just as the dresser is a distorted, deathly echo of domesticity, so too is the text a mere doppelganger. Wright’s short story deploys literary conventions of domestic fiction, pastoralism, and particularly the disaster narrative. But as in Tom’s cabin, these literary echoes are rendered grotesque. Tom, May and Sally cannot access the sanctuary available to them as protagonists of a disaster narrative. The definitive genre, the only narrative in which they may participate, is the sharecropper’s blues, and it is one from which they cannot escape. And while this genre affords lament it cannot provide refuge – it lionizes endurance but cannot narrate freedom. The disaster narrative, Wright’s text suggests, is not a form of expression in which they can participate, for the family are not protagonists in that kind of story. In this way, “The Man Who Saw the Flood” asserts the

limitations of the disaster narrative itself, for *the* story cannot be made to tell *this* story. For all the family's pluck, for all their resilience and willingness to work hard – to clean and gather and restart a life – history has no re-beginning in this text. Despite the disaster narrative's promise of catastrophic renewal, Tom and his family experience the opposite, and life after the flood “inexorably returns to normal” (Howard 53). No phoenix rises from the ashes, and in Wright's short story, the possibility of refuge remains unfulfilled.

"Old Man": Faulkner's Provisional Asylum:

I went and climbed a tall old lonesome tree.
 I went and climbed up a tall old lonesome tree.
 I couldn't stand to see my house float away from me.
 --Alice Pearson, 'Water Bound Blues.'

William Faulkner's novella “Old Man” (1939) is one of the great American river texts. In it Faulkner writes back to Mark Twain, whose nineteenth-century novel told of another journey on the Mississippi, by another unfree man and his child companion. In both accounts the river is a kind of purgatory – a time of trial. Malcolm Cowley says of “Old Man,” “It isn't as good as *Huckleberry Finn*, by some distance, but it is the only other story of the Mississippi that can be set aside *Huckleberry Finn* without shriveling under the comparison; it is the only other story in American literature that gives the same impression of the power and legendary sweep of the River” (434). The power of that river -- and its suppression of the protagonist -- is key to Faulkner's text. “Old Man” is based on real events of the Great Mississippi Flood. Parchman Prison is a real penitentiary, and convicts were indeed press-ganged into levee work during the 1927 flood. The Mounds Landing levee did burst and there was a backwater at Carnarvon. Moreover, the Tall Convict himself is based on a real prisoner, whose words upon finally surrendering to a sheriff were reported in a newspaper story which Faulkner read, clipped, and upon which he based his novella.

"Old Man" begins and ends in Parchman Prison during the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927. The protagonist, who is identified only as the Tall Convict, is incarcerated in the Mississippi State Penitentiary and work farm.¹¹⁰ Awoken during the night of April 21 -- the date of the catastrophic levee breach at Mound's Landing -- the Tall Convict and his fellow prisoners are transported to the Vicksburg levee for emergency work. Once there, the Tall Convict and a fellow prisoner are given a boat and sent out on the swollen river to rescue a woman trapped in a cypress tree and a man stranded on the ridgepole of a cottonhouse. Separated almost immediately from his fellow prisoner, the Tall Convict accidentally finds the stranded woman, who is heavily pregnant and who soon gives birth. For the remainder of the text the Tall Convict navigates the Mississippi River in full flood, accompanied by his unnamed female companion and her infant child. Notably, instead of leaving the woman and fleeing into anonymous freedom, the Tall Convict strives to return to Vicksburg, surrender his charges to the authorities and presumably be returned to prison. A series of complications delay this conclusion: unbeknownst to the Tall Convict, the river is running backward, so he unwittingly travels upstream, away from his destination. While attempting to surrender to military personnel on a levee, the Tall Convict is shot at and forced to retreat once the soldiers spot his prison uniform and assume he is a deserter. And twice during their odyssey, the river rises with a great wave and hurtles the skiff and its passengers downstream, amid buildings, human and animal corpses and debris large and small. During the journey, torrential rain continues to fall and the river continues to rise. The only respite occurs when the Tall Convict and the woman spend ten days in a bayou shack with a Cajun alligator hunter. But soon this refuge too is flooded, by the April 29 backwater at Caernarvon.¹¹¹ Seven weeks after setting out in search of the stranded flood refugees, the Tall Convict reaches Vicksburg, and voluntarily surrenders to a sheriff, saying, "Yonder's your boat, and here's the woman. But I never did find that bastard on the cottonhouse" (514). In what one critic calls "the most cynical ending in

¹¹⁰ Parchman is a real prison; it is Mississippi's only maximum security prison for men. Still a working farm staffed by inmates, Parchman also appears in Faulkner's *The Mansion* as the prison in which Mink Snopes is incarcerated.

¹¹¹ The backwater at Caernarvon is the deliberate dynamiting of the levee, ostensibly carried out to protect New Orleans from flood.

modern literature,” the Tall Convict is returned to Parchman Prison, where, in order to avoid political scandal and a Senate investigation, the Warden charges him with escape, and adds ten years to the Tall Convict’s sentence (Stonesifer 255).

The publication history of “Old Man” is almost as convoluted as the story itself. The novella was originally published in a volume entitled *The Wild Palms* (1939), along with a second novella – also called “The Wild Palms.” The text alternates chapter by chapter between the two tales, beginning with the first chapter of “The Wild Palms” and ending with the last chapter of “Old Man.” Entitled *The Wild Palms* by the publisher -- over Faulkner’s objections -- since 1990 the two-story collection has been published under the author’s preferred title *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem*. “The Wild Palms” is the story of Henry and Charlotte, two lovers who renounce bourgeois values when Charlotte abandons her husband and children to elope with Henry. The couple travels the country looking for work, and end in tragedy when Charlotte dies from an abortion performed by Henry. “Old Man” has generally been read by critics as a counterpoint to “The Wild Palms”; scholars have emphasized the structure of the doubled text, and particularly its alternating rather than sequential arrangement. In addition to these structural readings, many critics have found “Old Man” and its protagonist lacking. The Tall Convict is often read as a fool, and his struggle as a mere physical ordeal which is understood as less sophisticated than the moral battle waged by Henry and Charlotte in “The Wild Palms.”¹¹² Alternately, Faulkner’s protagonist is viewed as simply obtuse, and readers are offended by the Tall Convict’s failure to grasp the freedom which has fallen unbidden into his lap. In a reversal of narrative expectation, he desires a return to the prison farm. His dogged insistence on *not* escaping is most comically and grotesquely evident when soldiers – having spotted his prison uniform – shoot at the Tall Convict as he approaches a levee. He calls out to the firing militia men: “I want to surrender! I want to surrender...Can’t you hear me?” (476). But the soldiers cannot hear him, and the Tall Convict is forced to retreat from this failed attempt at capitulation. The Tall Convict’s refusal to escape is often read as simply mulish – it recalls the stupidity of an animal not smart enough to run when it has the chance. Faulkner’s protagonist cannot bear the

¹¹² See W.R. Moses in *Modern Fiction Studies*, and Joseph J. Moldenhauer in “The Unity of *The Wild Palms*.”

burdens of freedom, these critics suggest, and so is a figure of mockery because he turns heroic effort to the ridiculous purpose of his own recapture.¹¹³ Marion Cumpiano, for instance, argues that the Tall Convict “prefers a prison world to the challenge of a difficult but spiritually free life” (193).¹¹⁴ Certainly, for the Tall Convict, Parchman represents “shelter from the disordering experience of modernity and, later, from the apocalyptic chaos of the flood” (Hoefler 545). But this desire does not indicate an utter failure of subjectivity. I want to suggest that these readings are themselves implicated in a liberal discourse of freedom. For these critics, liberty is reified as an absolute good – one the Tall Convict violates not only because he does not know enough to escape when the overseer’s back is turned, but also because he cannot imagine a world beyond prison. By preferring the familiar, ordered routine of Parchman over the wild unsteadiness of the external world represented by the flooded river, the Tall Convict fails to meet the test – and text – of citizenship in a cosmopolitan world. Faulkner’s protagonist, then, fails not only as a freedom-seeking subject, but also as an American. He is not the exemplary citizen who strains at all moments against the manacle, the slaver’s whip or the crown’s taxation. In this way the Tall Convict fails to embody the ideal liberal subject, and this is the most American of sins – he does not cast off his shackles but willingly drags them behind him.

This emphasis on the Tall Convict’s embrace of unfreedom also disregards the role of asylum in “Old Man.” For Faulkner’s protagonist does not remain wedded to his status as prisoner throughout the entire text. While lying on the floor of the bayou shack that constitutes the text’s sole place of refuge, the Tall Convict gazes at the prison uniform he has finally shed and bundled up high in the shanty’s rafters. He considers the uniform before turning out the light, “thinking not, *They never gave me time to learn but I had forgot how good it is to work*” (503). This passage suggests that the Tall Convict is no comfortable and willing inhabitant of unfreedom, simply too lazy and weak-minded to grasp at escape and self-determination. Instead, in the bayou interlude the Tall Convict

¹¹³ See especially Michael Millgate in *The Achievement of William Faulkner* and Thomas L. McHaney in *William Faulkner’s The Wild Palms: A Study*.

¹¹⁴ Dorothy H. Lee echoes this assessment, asserting that the text “recounts the choice the convict makes between freedom...and the security of existence within the confines of the prison farm” (368).

awakes from the dulling experience of Parchman Prison into a kind of self-consciousness that only blooms in the zone of refuge -- represented here in the move from "they" to "I." This passage also hints at the power of institutionalization. The Tall Convict's dogged resistance to escape is testament to the authority of the disciplinary state, to the "they" who controlled his life while incarcerated. In this sense, it is not too extreme to suggest that the "world of force that the convict has been dealing with could prompt him to do little else but return" (Cate 186). "Old Man" suggests that prison is not merely a detention facility patrolled by armed guards. In Faulkner's novella, escape is considerably more complicated than scaling a prison wall. The unnamed protagonist's moniker -- the Tall Convict -- is indicative of the vexed status of liberty here. It's useful to remember that Parchman Prison did not free the Tall Convict when they sent him to rescue flood refugees stranded in cypress tree and cottonpole. In a moment of disaster, the conversion of inmate to labourer was convenient and necessary for the state. Prisoners in this moment are rendered literally vital labour, and the separation from society -- which is central to all incarceration -- is superseded. Society's need to segregate and punish is trumped by its need for life-giving labour. Punishment, it seems, is a second-order need, to be indulged only when disaster does not threaten the society itself. And the distinction between inmate and convict is evident in Faulkner's text. Note that once he leaves Parchman, the Tall Convict is still a convict. No longer prisoner or inmate, he is nevertheless perpetually convicted. And this is not only a fact of his existence; it is also how he is known, as the 'Tall Convict,' at every stage of the story. While on the flooded Mississippi River, the protagonist exists in a liminal state, neither wholly free nor unfree. He is not in jail, but neither is he at liberty; not an escapee, but nevertheless at large. The sense that the protagonist's name is his destiny -- that throughout the text he remains a convict -- also recalls Faulkner's determinism. It is only in the bayou interlude, at last able to shed his convict's uniform, that the protagonist begins to refashion his identity. He moves from prisoner to free man, although not in a conventional heroic arc. In this sanctuary the Tall Convict temporarily escapes both radical individualism and determinism. In "Old Man," then, freedom is contingent upon the material experience of refuge. Just as in *The Grapes of Wrath* Tom Joad can only dream his dream of Jeffersonian independence after experiencing Weedpatch, so too must

the Tall Convict work freely in the Cajun bayou before he can shed his uniform and imagine himself out of imprisonment. In both “Old Man” and *The Grapes of Wrath*, the experience of asylum is the necessary antecedent – and even originator – of the dream of freedom.

It is in the bayou that the Tall Convict finds sanctuary. And in “Old Man,” this refuge constitutes a compelling zone of exception. From the moment he sets out in the skiff, the Tall Convict strives to complete his task: to drop off the pregnant woman and return to Parchman. This drive pauses only once, when the peripatetic Tall Convict finds refuge in the bayou with a Cajun alligator hunter.¹¹⁵ The Tall Convict and the woman come upon this bayou refuge by accident, as they journey towards Vicksburg. Welcomed into the bayou shack, the Tall Convict joins the hunt, and soon begins to collect alligator skins by which he hopes to finance the remainder of his journey. While there, he begins to reconsider :

He would have to move on soon, thinking (the convict), *All this durn foolishness will stop soon and I can get on back*, and then suddenly he found that he was thinking, *Will have to get on back*, and he became quite still and looked about at the rich strange desert which surrounded him, in which he was temporarily lost in peace and hope and into which the last seven years had sunk like so many trivial pebbles into a pool, leaving no ripple (501-2).

For the first time here, the Tall Convict sees Parchman Prison not as the place to which he wishes to return, but as the place to which he is compelled to return. Grammar is instructive here, as the Tall Convict shifts from “*I can get on back*” and “*will have to get on back*” (501). In this moment of transition, when choice is revealed as compulsion, it is the bayou which emerges as the desired place. Established in direct opposition to prison, the Southern swamp – which Faulkner describes here as a “rich strange desert” – actually subsumes the seven years the Tall Convict spent at the prison farm. Not merely an

¹¹⁵ Some scenes in “Old Man” are alarmingly comic, and none more so than the sequences in which the Tall Convict wrestles alligators to the death. In Faulknerian fashion, the fantastical is mixed with the bloody, and the alligator’s thrashing death – which the text refers to as “Pleistocene nightmares” – as the activity of refuge surely indicates something about the nature of asylum, or perhaps about the relentless grotesqueness of the Faulknerian universe (497).

alternative to incarceration, here the bayou incorporates it. The pebbles of the Tall Convict's years of imprisonment drop beneath the surface of the swamp, "leaving no ripple." They do not trouble the waters, but are entirely enveloped by the amnesiac powers of the bayou. Away from the river, inland on the Mississippi-Yazoo Delta, the Tall Convict at last experiences the conventional generic solace of pastoralism. In a familiar generic scene, the Tall Convict stands beside the waters and is comforted and changed. Indeed, he is, as the protagonist himself reflects, at peace. The Tall Convict is "temporarily lost" in this "rich strange desert" – phrasing which echoes the scriptural Israelites and their desert journey. Like Rexford Tugwell's 'What Should America do for the Joads' and Reverend Sutton E. Griggs' 'Saving the Day,' "Old Man" invokes the archetypal desert-wanderers here. But while both the Israelites and the Tall Convict are homeless in an extreme landscape, and while the Tall Convict is lost, it is contentedly so, for he is "lost in peace and hope" (501-2). This is no banishment then, but a kind of asylum. It is refuge, rather than expulsion. It is while living in the bayou shack, killing alligators in hand-to-claw combat, that the protagonist is changed. Mere freedom from shackles does not do it; the Tall Convict does not re-imagine Parchman Prison and its status as definitive refuge until he is off the river, in the Delta, out of the skiff and earning a living.¹¹⁶

The bayou desert in "Old Man" also constitutes freedom from compelled movement. In this interlude of asylum, the Tall Convict moves in neither flight nor pursuit. This recalls *The Grapes of Wrath*, in which the peripatetic Joads' tenure in Weedpatch is a brief respite from relentless motion. In the bayou camp Faulkner's Tall Convict no longer flees the raging Mississippi River or chases completion of his task -- the return of flood refugees. In both these texts, then, asylum constitutes a pause. Sanctuary is respite from Faulkner's flooded Mississippi and the Okies' dispossession. However, the space of asylum is not entirely motionless: the Joads still drive out from

¹¹⁶ Although Cynthia Dobbs reads the bayou interlude as significant because it constitutes "a paradoxical dual engagement with work and disengagement from a cash economy," for the protagonist, the work of alligator hunting is valuable precisely because of its cash value (823). For the Tall Convict, the two are inextricable rather than differentiated. As the protagonist muses, "Yes. I had done forgot how good making money was. Being let to make it...[He] had not even known until now how good work, making money, could be" (502, 505).

Weedpatch to look for work each morning, and return each night. And the Tall Convict travels the bayou waters, hunting alligators. What makes the stillness of asylum unique is its freedom from coercive forward motion: from the relentless need to move on, either to find food or to flee a rising river. In the space of asylum, stillness is made possible, and the unremitting propulsion of the external world is temporarily suspended.

And in the bayou-desert, stasis is not inert stagnation, but instead a productive stillness. While the bayou does indeed soundlessly swallow the Tall Convict's seven years of imprisonment, pastoral refuge here is not solely an agent of solace and amnesia. Even as prison drops away, something is also returned to the protagonist. The passage in which the bayou is a "strange desert" ends with a deviation from pastoral generics: "[H]e thought quietly, with a kind of bemused amazement, *Yes. I reckon I had done forgot how good making money was. Being let to make it*" (502). Labour economics are generally excluded from the pastoral genre, which, as many critics have noted, is defined by its imaginary exemption from monetization. Indeed, work itself is conventionally excluded from pastoral texts. But it is in the bayou that the Tall Convict stops thinking of paid labour merely as a means by which to "get on back" to Vicksburg. In the bayou asylum, labour becomes a mode of self-definition, rather than a form of punishment or paying his debt to society (502). The Tall Convict reflects on the "seven wasted years during which, so he had just realized, he had been permitted to toil but not to work" (503). Exertion is parsed from work here. In jail, the Tall Convict toils. In the bayou, he works. Again, as in the earlier shift from "*can* get on back" and "*will have to* get on back," in refuge coercion becomes evident to the Tall Convict, as he considers "*being let to make [money]*" (501, 502). Significantly, then, asylum in the bayou-desert is not leisure. The Cajun shack is not a vacation spot. It is instead labour rendered meaningful, and emancipated from the toil of prison work.

The interlude in the bayou shack, then, is the only moment in the text when the Tall Convict truly escapes the prison farm. It is in this interlude of primeval wrestling with nature, and of economic survival through killing, that the Tall Convict secures something like escape -- not a physical getaway, but internal freedom. This refuge is distinguished by the external sign of the Tall Convict's unfreedom, for it's in the bayou

asylum that the protagonist at last removes his prison uniform. The shedding of this marker of incarceration is long-delayed. While riding the skiff down the river the Tall Convict repeatedly faces mortal danger, and although two different boats offer help if the protagonist will only remove his uniform, he refuses. It is only in the bayou asylum that he sheds his prison garb. Having “begged borrowed or bought from the man whom he had not laid eyes on twelve hours ago...the pair of dungaree pants which even the Cajun had discarded as no longer wearable,” the Tall Convict tells the woman to wash his prison uniform, and goes alligator hunting wearing only the Cajun’s old tattered pants, his naked back exposed to the Southern sun and mosquitoes (495). In this way the casting off of these garments is costly. For once the uniform has been laundered, the Tall Convict “spread the garments out and examined them and then rolled them up carefully in a six-months-old New Orleans paper and thrust the bundle behind a rafter, where it remained while day followed day and the blisters on his back broke and suppurated and he would sit with his face expressionless as a wooden mask beneath the sweat while the Cajun doped his back with something on a filthy rag from a filthy saucer” (496). The Tall Convict suffers for this new identity; putting aside the prisoner is a physical trial. But even the agony of a blistered sunburn and insect bites does not drive him back into the garb of the prisoner. Like the New Orleans newspaper in which his uniform is wrapped, the jailhouse clothes are outdated. And his hard-earned freedom is not easily relinquished. Even after the backwater destroys the bayou shack and the Tall Convict is forcibly removed from the space of sanctuary, he does not immediately put the uniform back on. It is not until months later, when he is just about to surrender his charges to the sheriff, that the Tall Convict re-dons his prison garb. In this sense asylum allows the protagonist to view his ‘prisoner’ status as a kind of performative identity, which he can take on and off at will. "Old Man" suggests that the categories of 'inmate' and 'freeman' are thus not signified by incarceration, but are internal.

As evidenced by the description of the bayou shack, and just as in *The Grapes of Wrath*, where Weedpatch is far from opulent, in “Old Man” asylum is hardscrabble. Faulkner’s gothic refuge is plagued by swarming flies, mosquito-ravaged flesh, weeping wounds and brutally high temperatures. In this text asylum is no shining city on the hill but a place of absurdist suffering; refuge in the desert-bayou is ugly and even brutal. Yet

these horrific conditions are nevertheless the space of refuge. Thus even as the Tall Convict reflects on his newfound peace, "temporarily lost in peace and hope," he retires to the floor of a crude cabin "a little larger than a horse-box...beside his snoring partner, to lie sweating (on his stomach, he could not bear the touch of anything to his back) in the whining oven-like darkness filled with the forlorn bellowing of alligators" (494, 503). The Tall Convict hunts alligators in a similarly gruesome environment, "his bowed back raw and savage as beef beneath the suppurant old blisters and the fierce welts of tails...pausing now and then to raise his head while the cloud of mosquitoes about it whined and whirled" (503). The bayou, then, is no lavish sanctuary. Instead, in "Old Man" Faulkner relentlessly segregates refuge from comfort, from pleasure, and even from the absence of physical pain. Asylum in "Old Man" is no bodily paradise, but nevertheless, the Tall Convict's liberty flourishes even as his body suffers.

Such simplicity highlights the dire need for refuge, for presumably only the most desperate asylees would remain in such a sanctuary. In this way the brutality of the text's asylum emphasizes the conditions from which the Tall Convict fled. If the bayou shack is the text's zone of refuge, the external world is, by implication, even more dire. However, the physically torturous conditions of refuge in "Old Man" also recall other instantiations of American sanctuary. Excess comfort, as Superintendent John White of Sequoia National Park suggests in "Atmosphere in the National Parks," is to be avoided, as it might degrade asylum's importance with frivolity. This insistence on simplicity and even discomfort serves to sharply distinguish asylum from leisure. The Joads and the Tall Convict are not holiday-makers. In contrast, Herbert Hoover constructs flood refugees in precisely the opposite fashion: as leisure-seekers, who enjoy concerts and films and experience the flood as vacation rather than emergency. The problem of distinguishing refuge from leisure continuously attends refuge.

In addition to its hardscrabble nature, asylum in "Old Man" is also temporary. Indeed, its provisional status is evident in the insistent encroachment of the outside world on the space of sanctuary. Just before the Tall Convict goes to sleep on the bayou shack floor and thinks, "*I had forgot how good it is to work,*" he chips away at a sapling from the Indian Mound, "which was almost a paddle now" (502, 503). If not for this single

reference, the reader would not know that the Tall Convict spends his evenings transforming a sapling into an oar – a tool of the forward motion which is temporarily stilled in the bayou. As the Tall Convict whittles the branch into a paddle, he implicitly acknowledges that asylum is an enclave, not a world entire. Another image of the outside world haunts the same passage. After working on the almost-paddle, before turning out the lantern and musing on how good it is to work, the Tall Convict “would take one last look at the rolled bundle behind the rafter” (503). This bundle is his prison uniform, unworn but not wholly discarded, representative of the inmate’s identity that still lingers, waiting to be put back on like an old suit of clothes. The prison uniform and the skiff’s makeshift paddle thus always accompany the Tall Convict. Even before he learns of the coming backwater that will flood the bayou asylum, the Tall Convict shares the Cajun’s shack with these reminders of the external world. These symbols are what the Tall Convict looks at before sleep – they are granted the status of ‘last,’ and serve as a reminder of the impermanent, provisional status of even the most fiercely guarded asylum. This evanescence is perhaps made most evident by the protagonist himself. Even in the moment when the Tall Convict recognizes the compulsion he has laboured under, asylum is rendered provisional. For the “rich strange desert” of the bayou asylum is where the Tall Convict is “*temporarily* lost in peace and hope” (502). As the years of incarceration slip beneath the surface of the swamp, sanctuary is nevertheless impermanent. And this foreshadowing is indeed fulfilled – asylum must and does end. Just as the Joads leave Weedpatch, so too is the Tall Convict driven out of the bayou. Despite its vital necessity, then, its status as a zone of productive revelation, asylum is always impermanent. And its provisional nature is evident even as asylees rest – temporarily – within its zone of protection. Notably, this impermanence is one of refuge’s primary characteristics, and not a measure of asylum’s success or failure. That is, better or more skillfully written disaster narratives do not end in perfect refuge. The temporariness of sanctuary is instead a defining characteristic of asylum, and not an index of its malfunction.

In Faulkner's novella, asylum is indeed temporary. The Tall Convict's refuge is literally swept away by the backwater at Caernarvon. On 21 April 1927, a group of New Orleans businessmen dynamited the levees and flooded Jefferson and St. Bernard

Parishes, ostensibly to protect the Crescent City. The Cajun knows this human-made flood is coming, and pantomimes its impending arrival to his guests. But the Tall Convict feigns ignorance of "the whole charade of eviction," and refuses to cede the space of asylum (505). The following day, after the Cajun has fled the bayou in advance of the backwater, a sheriff comes to clear out the stragglers. Sensing this intrusion, the Tall Convict paddles back to the shack:

[W]here he knew it was already too late, that citadel where the very crux and dear breath of his life – the being allowed to work and earn money, that right and privilege which he believed he had earned to himself unaided, asking no favor of anyone or anything save the right to be let alone to pit his will and strength against the sauric protagonist of a land, a region, which he had not asked to be projected into – was being threatened. (507)

The Tall Convict here uses the language of refuge to describe the bayou. It is a "citadel" – a fortress or sanctuary -- which is "threatened" by an unwelcome invader. This is martial language, but more particularly the antiquated rhetoric of war. And this discourse elevates the Tall Convict into a knight-keeper of a castle, suggesting that his is an honourable battle. Certainly, it is consequential. For the Tall Convict depicts refuge in literally vital terms. This "citadel" is the home of "the very crux and dear breath of his life." In "Old Man," then, sanctuary is life-giving. It is the space in which the Tall Convict's life is at last animated. Here again, just as the bayou asylum is about to be extinguished, the Tall Convict deems it a zone of exception. In contrast to Parchman Prison, it is where the protagonist can practice his "right and privilege...to work and earn money." Refuge is configured explicitly as a place here; the bayou citadel is "where" the Tall Convict can work freely, and it is the vulnerability of this space which causes his very life to be "threatened." The borders of asylum are perilously permeable here, as the backwater will soon rush into the citadel-refuge. But despite this inevitability, the Tall Convict will not leave. When the sheriff arrives to evacuate remaining bayou residents, the Tall Convict resists abandoning his citadel-asylum. Finally, he is "manacled hand and foot," and forcibly expelled (509). Coercion, which the Tall Convict first recognizes in the bayou asylum, is deployed here in order to expel him from sanctuary. And this

destruction of refuge is accompanied by another violation. The alligator skins -- that measure of the Tall Convict's productive labour -- are left behind by the men who refuse the protagonist's request to bring along his "hides" (509). Thus not only is the bayou asylum itself destroyed, but the work which defined that zone of exception, which rendered it a "citadel," is also lost in the flood. And it is notable that the Tall Convict isn't merely exiled from refuge. Sanctuary itself is obliterated here. The bayou asylum is no more, as the swamp is inundated by flood waters released in the Caernarvon backwater. Return to sanctuary thus rendered impossible, the Tall Convict and his companions are delivered to an emergency relief centre in New Orleans, where they are fed and clothed. During the night, the Tall Convict wakes the woman and her baby and together they leave the shelter, get back in the boat, and return to their journey along the Mississippi. The destruction of asylum returns the protagonist to his original task, and for the remainder of the text, he toils towards this goal without rest.

This destruction of refuge is accomplished not by the Mississippi River itself, but by human hands. Asylum's end is wrought by the sheriff who compels the Tall Convict, shackled, out of the bayou, and the men who approve the backwater at Caernarvon. On the protagonist's tenth day living in the asylum of the bayou-desert, he learns that the sanctuary will be destroyed once again by floodwaters:

Then on the tenth day it happened. It happened for the third time...What he declined to accept was the fact that a power, a force such as that which had been consistent enough to concentrate upon him with deadly undeviation for weeks, should with all the wealth of cosmic violence and disaster to draw from, have been so barren of invention and imagination, so lacking in pride of artistry and craftsmanship, as to repeat itself twice. Once he had accepted, twice he even forgave, but three times he simply declined to believe (503-4).

Here the Tall Convict indicts the Old Man himself – the Mississippi River, fate and the divine – for the crime of which he has been accused: a failure of imagination. For the third time since the Tall Convict has been on the Mississippi, the river rises with a huge wave, and here evicts him from the text's only space of asylum. In this moment,

catastrophe itself is derivative. It's not fire or drought that afflicts the Tall Convict, but yet another Mississippi River deluge. Certainly this suggests, as Cate observes, a kind of absurdity, as the “powers that be make a mockery of ordinary motion” (188). But absurd or not, the repetition is consequential. The text itself is a farce of repetitive, mule-like action. When the Tall Convict at last finds refuge from prison, the flooded Mississippi, and the unfreedom Parchman so effectively cultivated in him, that asylum is washed away. Having shed his prison uniform, he is propelled back into peril. The provisional existence of asylum and the freedom it guarantees is ultimately subverted here.

Faulkner's novella mocks escape of any kind – from prison, from futility, and from literary repetition. Innovation itself is dead in “Old Man.” The text constitutes a fable about dumb men and mute river gods who know only how to repeat. Refuge cannot stand in “Old Man”; while he is able to temporarily find asylum, there are some things the Tall Convict cannot escape.

“Down by the Riverside”:

The water was round my windows and backin' all up in my door...

The police say work, fight, or go to jail, I say I ain't totin' no sack.

Police say work, fight, or go to jail, I say I ain't totin' no sack.

And I ain't buildin' no levee, the planks is on the ground and I ain't drivin' no nails.

--“Broken Levee Blues,” Lonnie Johnson

“Down by the Riverside” begins in a flooding house. As the waters rise around them, Brother Mann, his children and pregnant wife Lulu – who has been in labour for two days with a breach birth – wait desperately for a family member to bring them a boat. When the dinghy finally arrives, it's been stolen from a white man. The family escapes the house, but on the arduous journey to the hospital they pass the boat's owners trapped in their own home. The white man, recognizing his boat, shoots at Brother Mann, who returns fire and kills him. The family of Mann continues their journey, but Lulu dies before they reach the levee hospital. At the levee Brother Mann is separated from the rest of his family, who are sent to refuge on higher ground. Refused sanctuary, Mann is

instead press-ganged into evacuating other stranded flood victims. In a twist of fate, he is sent to rescue the family of the man he shot. Realizing that if he saves the would-be evacuees he will be identified as a murderer, Mann almost kills them himself. But as the flooding house collapses around them, Brother Mann instead saves the family and helps them to safety. Having reached the levee, the family identifies Mann as a thief and a killer. As a crowd of armed white men gathers around, Mann turns and runs along the levee, thinking, “Ahll die fo they kill me!” (123). He is shot in the back and falls to the ground, dying as a soldier stands over him saying, “You shouldntve run, Goddamnit!” The soldier pushes Brother Mann’s body off the levee where it comes to rest at the river’s edge.

“Down by the Riverside” was published in *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938), and is often read within the context of the collection as a whole. Critics note that although Brother Mann dies at the hands of a lynch mob, protagonists in later stories more effectively assert their humanity in the face of a hostile, racist society: “The four stories in *Uncle Tom’s Children*...dramatize a slow but steady progress from victimhood to human dignity” (Ward and Butler 104). Indeed, the literary merit of “Riverside” is a matter of some dispute. Scholars such as Edward Margolies and Granville Hicks argue that the story is not as successful as others in *Uncle Tom’s Children*, such as “Big Boy Leaves Home,” and that its reliance on coincidence renders it unrealistic. Other readers, including Robert Van Gelder and Thomas L. Ashton, single out “Down by the Riverside” as a signal literary accomplishment in an important collection. Ashton in particular compares “Riverside” to William Faulkner, Joseph Conrad and Fyodor Dostoevsky. In recent years the text has been the focus of renewed critical attention, for in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Wright’s short story has been read as a pre-text to the 2005 disaster. Scholars suggest that, just as in New Orleans, the real disaster in “Down by the Riverside” is not the flood but the “preexisting social and economic structures” of the South (Hoefer 552). For these critics, “Riverside” is an account of racialized, institutionalized violence set against the backdrop of a catastrophic deluge. But, like “Old Man” and “The Man Who Saw the Flood,” “Riverside”'s revelation of the unnaturalness of natural disaster has a literary as well as a sociological valence. Like

"Flood," the story of Brother Mann subverts the disaster narrative's promise of catastrophic renewal, and also of viable asylum. A boat and a stairway out of the flooding house play prominent roles in "Down by the Riverside." Both symbols of refuge and modes of material escape, the dinghy and steps ultimately function as ghostly reminders of the impossibility of sanctuary.

Richard Wright's flood story is an extended meditation on frustrated egress. In the text's opening lines, Brother Mann worries about the soundness of his house and whether the foundation can survive the deluge.¹¹⁷ However, this anxiety is quickly displaced by an even more urgent fear: "But what really worried him were the steps; they might wash away at any moment, and then they would be trapped. He had spent all that morning trying to make them secure with frayed rope, but he did not have much faith. He walked to the window and the half-rotting planks sagged under his feet. He had never realized they were that shaky" (54). The steps to the flooding house symbolize thwarted escape. If the stairs give way, Mann knows that the family is "trapped," yet effort and labour cannot fashion a reliable mode of egress. Despite Brother Mann's attempts "all that morning," neither the stairway nor the escape they represent can be made secure. Notably, the unsteadiness of the steps is not new, nor is it a result of the floodwaters. Instead, the stairs out have always been insecure, but Mann "had never realized they were that shaky." The deluge thus doesn't create danger but instead reveals enduring vulnerability. The escape route Mann agonizes over is indeed unsafe, for his family is trapped not only by the floodwaters, but also by the political economy of institutionalized racism. From the text's first lines, then, Brother Mann's access to asylum is compromised and unsure. Significantly, however, in "Riverside" the stairs aren't entirely washed away. Instead they are still extant, embodying both escape and jeopardy. This subversion of symbolic and material refuge is echoed in the text's representation of the boat. The most obvious sanctuary in any flood, in Wright's hands the boat is a doubled symbol. No sheltering ark, the vessel is both potentially lifesaving and catastrophically

¹¹⁷ Brother Mann's name stands for the universal. He is a 'brother man' who seeks aid in a time of need. The protagonist is thus generalized to all of humanity and is no longer simply an anonymous individual; similarly, he is a brother and not a stranger.

risky. Stolen from a white man, the boat could save Lulu's life, but instead ends up killing Brother Mann. Thus the method of escape is as treacherous as the natural disaster itself. The family of Mann can neither safely remain in their flooding house nor escape unharmed. In this way, "Down by the Riverside" undermines the notion of asylum as geographical displacement. Brother Mann can't get anywhere else. His entrapment subverts the American mythology of sanctuary as that which lies somewhere else: above the Mason-Dixon Line or across the Atlantic Ocean. Richard Wright describes the traditional lure of the North as a place of refuge for African-Americans: "The compulsion of Negro life in the Deep South is to get up and travel, to get North. Other Negroes come back and tell you that a Negro in the North is treated like a human being, and, if you want certain things, you get up and travel hundreds of miles" (*Conversations* 3-4). But Brother Mann is denied this mode of geographical sanctuary which is so central to the American imaginary of refuge. And as Tucker notes, Wright's work constitutes an "indictment of the urban North, [and of] the construction of the North as an escape from the horrors of the South" (107). In "Riverside," the boat and the steps represent not only the socio-economic prison of race, but also the inaccessibility of refuge itself. While the stairway and the boat are present in Wright's text, they cannot fulfill their most basic function, as there is nowhere for Brother Mann to go. Asylum is thus evoked and bankrupted in "Riverside," as the text suggests that sanctuary is both existent and unattainable.

The boat and stairs aren't the only markers of asylum in the text. Brother Mann's body also serves as an evocative metaphor for the impossibility of accessing refuge. After Lulu dies, the stolen boat is commandeered and the family is transported at last to safety in "the hills" (63, 77). Brother Mann, however, is conscripted into service on the levee: "Your folksll go on to the hills and you can stay here and help on the levee" (77). When Mann protests, the officer overrules him, citing emergency measures: "'This is martial law,' said the colonel... 'Put this woman and boy into a boat and ship them to the hills. Give this nigger some boots and a raincoat and ship him to the levee!'" (77-8). Here the colonel articulates what Giorgio Agamben calls the state of exception, in which the sovereign invocation of a state of emergency justifies the suspension of civilian rights. A victim of this juridical exceptionalism, Brother Mann is denied agency and instead converted into a tool of the state. And the language by which this conversion is

accomplished is notable. The colonel repeats his order several times, giving it the effect of a refrain which is almost jovial: "C'mon, boy! Let's get your boots and raincoat. You're going to the levee" (78). In response to this juridical erasure of his citizenship, Mann thinks, "Ah got t git outta here some way. Go where they cant fin me" (79). Denied the right to escape with his family to the sanctuary of the hills, Mann seeks instead refuge comprised of escape and invisibility. To be unseen, beyond the disciplinary eye and arm of the state, constitutes sanctuary here. But there is no such place in "Down by the Riverside." There is no Weedpatch beyond the reach of corrupt officials. Instead, he is the material of sanctuary, deployed against his wishes and at great peril. "Down by the Riverside" thus most closely echoes not 'Saving the Day,' but the *New York Times* article which Griggs re-wrote in his sermon, and in which black bodies constitute the levee itself. In this way, "Riverside" breaks with the scriptural account of the Great Deluge and its promise of catastrophic renewal. Brother Mann is no Noah, and the levee -- that putative guarantor of refuge -- is not the locale of sanctuary but of death. In the text's final lines, Mann becomes a literal sandbag, as his corpse is pushed off the levee and comes to rest at the river's edge. This concluding image's indictment of the Noachian model of disaster as a re-beginning in which asylum guarantees freedom anticipates the perilous sanctuary evident in the texts of Hurricane Katrina.

Chapter 4

'They're Trying to Wash Us Away':

Hurricane Katrina's

Hazardous Sanctuary

Help is on the way
(They said, they said)
One by land, two by sea...
We keep axes in the attics,
To see cameras in the sky....
Help is on the way.
But it never came!
It never came.

--'Help is On the Way,' Rise Against

In 2008, British street artist Banksy visited New Orleans and made several graffiti images to mark the third anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. Many of Banksy's Katrina images appeared on buildings either damaged or abandoned due to the twin disasters of storm and levee failure.¹¹⁸ The images are varied: one shows a young boy blowing a trumpet and is painted on the side of a derelict house, high water marks still visible on the siding. Another depicts Abraham Lincoln -- in his iconic stovepipe hat -- as a homeless man, pushing a trolley cart filled with recyclables. Hovering over the Great Emancipator's shoulder is a sign reading 'Private Property Keep Out.' In one of the many echoes between the Dust Bowl and Hurricane Katrina, this ironic collision between Abraham

¹¹⁸ Or did appear -- some of the images were painted over immediately, either by property owners or competing graffiti artists. This erasure is a common hazard of street art, so much so that ephemerality is definitive of the genre's signification, as Lachmann suggests in "Graffiti as career and ideology."

Lincoln -- author of the Emancipation Proclamation -- and an assertion of property rights excluding the disenfranchised, is repeated in the frequently unsung verse of Woody Guthrie's Dust Bowl anthem 'This Land is Your Land': "There was a big high wall there that tried to stop me;/ Sign was painted, it said private property;/ But on the back side it didn't say nothing;/ This land was made for you and me." The most controversial of Banksy's Katrina images, however, shows a second line -- the New Orleans tradition of brass band musicians following an official parade through the streets -- playing their trumpets, trombones and drums while wearing gas masks. In a particularly evocative image of refuge, two of the pieces feature children with umbrellas. The first depicts a boy just after an umbrella is torn from his grasp, and this image echoes one of Banksy's earlier -- and most famous -- pieces. Commonly referred to as 'Balloon Girl,' this earlier image shows a young girl in profile, arm outstretched towards a heart-shaped balloon which has seemingly just slipped her grasp. The piece is in shaded black and white, while the balloon is bright red. The girl's hair is wind-swept, and it seems that the balloon has been blown out of her hand by a gust of air. The piece captures a moment of loss: a possession so recently secure is now elusive and wind-borne. To the right of the girl, at the same height as the errant balloon, a sentence is printed: 'THERE IS ALWAYS HOPE.' Written by hand, in all caps, using what looks like white chalk, this line serves as an interpretive directive for the piece. The viewer determines whether the line offers sentimental reassurance or an ironic comment on loss.

Umbrella Boy -- Banksy's New Orleans piece which can be read as a kind of companion to Balloon Girl -- is considerably less hopeful. This image shows a young boy in profile, arm outstretched towards an umbrella, which has seemingly been blown from his grasp. The boy looks up at the umbrella as it soars away, his gaze, like his extended arm, fixed up and into the distance. The umbrella has travelled some distance, and in the moment depicted, is much further out of reach than the girl's balloon. In this image, the desired object is not just beyond the grasp, and the moment narrated is not the moment of loss. Instead, the umbrella is already remote. The boy is lightly dressed, in shorts and a t-shirt, and we cannot see his feet; he could be standing in a few inches of water. There is no colour in this image: no spot of Balloon Girl's red. And Umbrella Boy himself is not shaded in black and white but is instead entirely black, recalling a

silhouette or shadow. The pure blackness of the image clearly suggests the racialized suffering of the hurricane, and the exemplary blackness of Katrina victims as represented in the media.¹¹⁹ Many critics have analyzed the media's racialized representation of Katrina victims, noting the ways in which blackness was conflated with victimhood, poverty and criminality both during the storm and in its aftermath. One of the most remarked-upon examples of this discourse of blackness is Wolf Blitzer's commentary as images of flooded New Orleans played on CNN: "You simply get chills every time you see those poor individuals...so many of these people, almost all of them that we see, are so poor, and they're so black" (Brinkley 204). There is no motto; no directive which instructs the reader, ironically or sincerely, on the meaning of the image. And the placement of the two images differs as well. While *Balloon Girl* was painted in London's South Bank, an arts and entertainment centre popular with tourists, *Umbrella Boy* appears on a levee wall.¹²⁰ Commenting on his Hurricane Katrina images, Banksy referred to the concrete levee as "the best painting surface in the state of Louisiana."

The London image contextualizes the New Orleans piece: *Balloon Girl*, while a poignant image, is not tragic. *Umbrella Boy*, in contrast, depicts the loss of refuge. The umbrella, meager shelter though it may be, is the only protection available to the boy. Banksy depicts here a representative Katrina refugee futilely grasping at a safe haven. The embodiment of shelter and asylum in an umbrella is remarkable for its sheer inadequacy. Just as the homely device holds no promise of protecting the boy against the deluge of hurricane and levee breach, so too did the levee system and government aid prove equally deficient. In Hurricane Katrina, both government policy and infrastructure offered no more shelter than an escaped umbrella. The only other sanctuary represented in the image is the levee wall on which the boy is painted -- and the failure of these putative securers of refuge is all too well known. When the levees failed, Banksy's

¹¹⁹ A few particularly trenchant examples of commentary on this racialized discourse: A.C. Thompson's reporting on Katrina for *The Nation*, and especially his article "Katrina's Hidden Race War"; Devon W. Carbado and Cheryl I. Harris's "Katrina: A Racial Disaster" in *After the Storm: Black Intellectuals Explore the Meaning of Hurricane Katrina* (2006); and "Sold Down the River" by Judith Jackson Fossett.

¹²⁰ The New Orleans levee wall is not Banksy's only politically evocative canvas; he has also painted variations of his balloon images on the West Bank wall, on both Palestinian and Israeli sides of the barricade.

Umbrella Boy would have been literally washed away, as many New Orleanians actually were.

Bankrupt asylum is the story we expect from Hurricane Katrina. Of the catastrophes examined in this thesis, Katrina is the only contemporary disaster. We know that refuge failed in New Orleans because we saw it happen: people were left to suffer and die on rooftops, in their attics, and at the Superdome, all on live television. We know that flood refugees reached out for shelter and found none. And the literature of Hurricane Katrina does indeed declare, emphatically, that refuge failed in New Orleans. The texts examined in this chapter -- James Lee Burke's short story 'Jesus Out to Sea' (2006), Dave Eggers' non-fiction account *Zeitoun* (2009), and Spike Lee's documentary *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006) -- all narrate the lethal absence of sanctuary in Hurricane Katrina. But, having denounced its failure, these texts do not simply abandon the concept of sanctuary. Indeed, refuge exists in Katrina disaster narratives just as it does in accounts of the Dust Bowl and the Great Mississippi Flood. In Dave Eggers' *Zeitoun*, for example, the protagonist is arrested and jailed, entirely without cause, as a suspected terrorist in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Despite this utter violation of asylum, *Zeitoun* experiences an expansionist vision of mythic refuge remarkably similar to Tom Joad's dream in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. In this case, as in many others, the features of asylum established in earlier chapters are exhibited in Hurricane Katrina disaster narratives.

But even as the texts of Hurricane Katrina exemplify the characteristics of refuge -- the theory of asylum -- laid out in earlier chapters, they do something else as well. These disaster narratives question the benevolent nature of refuge. This interrogation is evident in another umbrella image from Banksy's Katrina series. This piece depicts a girl, facing the viewer, holding an umbrella over her head and stretching her hand out to check the weather. Unexpectedly, however, there's a reversal: instead of providing shelter from the rain, the umbrella is the source of the deluge. The girl tentatively reaches her hand outside the penumbra of sanctuary only to discover that while it rains inside the umbrella, it's dry outside. Shelter is made hazardous here. The umbrella,

which exists only to protect, endangers. Umbrella Girl suggests, then, that refuge not only fails, but that sanctuary is itself disastrous.

It is this revelation of asylum as hazardous that characterizes Hurricane Katrina narratives. This development is not without precedent; it follows on the previous chapter's analysis of Richard Wright's short stories which repudiate the disaster narrative's promise of regeneration through catastrophe. Wright's texts argue that this generically conventional renewal is not available to African-American sharecroppers in the wake of the 1927 Great Mississippi Flood. But unlike Wright's stories, Katrina narratives do not negate refuge's sheltering potential. Instead, the texts examined in this chapter reveal the doubled logic of asylum. Refuge, Katrina texts assert, is inherently both inclusive and exclusive. Indeed, exclusivity ensures sanctuary: everyone doesn't get in, as is evident in 'Jesus Out to Sea.' Asylum is sanctuary precisely because it is not universally available -- because of its strictly delimited border. Hazardous refuge, then, is not a reversal or subversion of the sheltering asylum of previous chapters. Rather, the texts of Hurricane Katrina reveal sanctuary's doubled nature as a zone of both shelter and hazard.

Before turning to the texts of Hurricane Katrina considered in this chapter, let's begin with a brief review of the disaster itself.

Hurricane Katrina: Chronology of a Disaster

Now I see we be the new faces of refugees, who ain't even overseas
 But stuck here on our knees...
 New world's upside down and OUT of order
 Shelter, food, what's up yo? (Where's the water?)
 No answers from disaster, them masses be hurtin...
 New Orleans in the mornin afternoon and night
 Hell naw! [HELL NAW] We ain't alright.

--"Hell No We Ain't Alright!" Public Enemy

In late August of 2005, a tropical storm made its way across Florida towards the Gulf Coast. By Thursday, August 25 tropical storm Katrina was strong enough to be re-categorized as a low-level hurricane. On Friday, August 26, Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco declared a state of emergency, and the next day, at the request of the governor, President George W. Bush declared Louisiana a federal state of emergency. By early Saturday afternoon, official calls for evacuation had led to congested freeways, and at 4pm on Saturday, contraflow started, reversing all inbound lanes so that every New Orleans highway carried only outflow traffic. In another echo of the Dust Bowl, historian Douglas Brinkley compares the exodus of New Orleans to the migrant workers of the 1930s: "Those on the highways were the modern-day equivalents of the Joads, the Dust Bowlers who escaped Oklahoma....The Road of Flight made famous in John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* was Route 66; its counterpart in advance of Katrina was I-10. Both led to Southern California. Each, in its time of crisis, was paved with equal parts hope and despair" (101).

Despite these anticipatory preparations, many forecasters believed Katrina would be sound and fury, rather than the child of Betsy and Camille -- hurricanes which devastated the Gulf region in 1965 and 1969. Indeed, in the days preceding the hurricane many observers still hoped the storm would turn, missing the population centre of New Orleans. But while traveling over the swamps of South Florida and the Gulf of Mexico, Katrina picked up the warm water that feeds a hurricane, and by Sunday, August 28, Katrina's wind speed had climbed so high that the storm was upgraded to a Category 5. Also on Sunday -- one day before the storm made landfall in Louisiana -- New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin opened the Louisiana Superdome as a "refuge of last resort"¹²¹ and issued a mandatory, city-wide evacuation order, calling Katrina the "storm that most of us have long feared". It was the first such order in New Orleans history.

¹²¹ In New Orleans' daily newspaper the *Times-Picayune*, Jeff Duncan explained the meaning of the 'refuge of last resort': "By definition, a 'refuge of last resort' is intended to serve only as a location to ride out a storm. Under the State of Louisiana Emergency Operations Plan, it could be located either inside or outside of the area of hurricane risk and was required to be 'wind resistant' and 'located outside of the flood zone or (provide the) ability to locate on floors.'" As Jeff Duncan reported on the one-year anniversary of the storm, "The state had requested 180,000 one-liter bottles of water and 109,400 Meals Ready to Eat to supply the Dome population, but only 43,776 MREs and 90,000 bottles of water were on hand. That was just enough to make it through Monday. More supplies were on the way, but the trucks were stymied by the weather."

Yet 2005 was not the first time the Crescent City faced such danger. As a city underwater, New Orleans had always been at the mercy of geography. Its 468 square miles have “ been drained and filled and leveed” to steal land back from ocean (Horne 71). When founded by French explorer Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville in 1718, the site was slightly above sea level. But by 2005, New Orleans lay “an average of six feet below the waterline, and as much as eleven feet in some parts of the Ninth Ward and Lakeview” (Brinkley 13). In addition to being below sea level, the Crescent City is also surrounded by water. In order to protect New Orleans from these hazards, levees were built along the city's water borders: the Mississippi River to the south and west, Lake Borgne to the east and Lake Ponchartrain to the north.¹²² New Orleans levees are earthen walls, essentially unchanged from the first bulwarks built by the city’s earliest European settlers. In recent years, floodwalls have been added to the top of some levees; these concrete barricades made the levees higher and thus theoretically afforded greater protection. But during Hurricane Katrina, both levees and floodwalls failed spectacularly.

The storm made landfall in New Orleans on Monday, August 29, and at first it appeared that the Crescent City had once again escaped the doomsday storm. Katrina did not make a direct hit on New Orleans – the eye of the storm passed by downtown, and by the time it reached the Crescent City the storm’s wind speed had dropped so that it barely qualified as a Category 3 storm. The wind and rain damage from the hurricane was not the disaster so many had feared for so long. As Garland Robinette, a New Orleans radio host commented, “[P]eople think we got hit by a hurricane. We got missed by a hurricane” (Lee). For after Katrina passed by, the city’s levee system failed spectacularly, with fatal consequences. Traveling over the Gulf of Mexico before it made landfall in Louisiana, Katrina’s vacuum force turned the Gulf beneath the enormous

¹²² From 1885 to 1926, Mississippi River flood protection followed what's known as a 'levees only' policy. Established by the Army Corps of Engineers, this approach to flood management rejects the use of reservoirs or artificial outlets, and blocks up all natural outlets from the river. The policy is based on the belief that increased water pressure will erode the river bed, making the Mississippi River's channel both deeper and safer for habitation. However, the approach instead caused water levels to rise, necessitating higher and higher levees. The 'levees only' policy has been highly controversial, and in 1955 the Army Corps of Engineers switched focus from flood prevention to surge protection -- but the remnants of the 'levee only' policy remain influential. In the wake of both the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and Hurricane Katrina the approach was once again highly contested.

storm into a dome of water, pulling sea levels high above normal. This dome of water is the storm surge which, when it hit the shore, rushed up the city's canals, rivers and waterways, overcoming levees and flooding the city. The storm surge "swept six miles inland and twelve miles up bayous and rivers before falling back in an outflow nearly as violent as the initial tsunami" (Horne 44). The surge travelled over Lakes Maurepas and Borgne and then through channels bordered by levees. By mid-morning on Monday, the earthen wall bordering the 17th Street Canal failed, and a twenty-foot-long breach had opened in the barricade, allowing water to pour out of the canal and into the city. A breach of this size was "catastrophic" – and by late Monday the rupture was a quarter mile wide (Cooper 136-7, 146). The same morning, the Industrial Canal levee failed, "with the force of a water cannon that...blew down the concrete flood walls above the earthen levees, and sent a Niagara of water thundering onto the streets" (Horne 43). Later that day the London Avenue Canal barrier was also breached. Making matters much worse, due to flooding and the failure of electricity, pumping stations ceased to function. As Jed Horne notes, the levee and pumps constitute the entirety of New Orleans' flood protection: "That was the essence of the city's defense – levees to keep the water out and pumps to mop the over-the-top surge when the levees came up short" (Horne 23). Without the levees or the pumps, 80% of New Orleans lay underwater -- a flooded area seven times bigger than Manhattan (Horne 53, 84). Some neighbourhoods were hit harder than others. By early Monday morning, the Lower Ninth Ward was under eight feet of water, and a storm surge twenty feet high devastated a town near the border between St Bernard and Orleans parishes. Even though the storm passed by the city, the levee failure meant that floodwaters reached levels commensurate with a catastrophic hurricane making a direct hit on New Orleans.

Notably, the levees didn't fail simply because they were too low to keep the water out; a levee is overtopped when floodwaters' elevation is so high that it spills over the top of the earthen walls designed to protect the city beyond, leaving those walls intact although insufficient to hold back the deluge. But when Hurricane Katrina made landfall in New Orleans on Monday 29 August 2005, the levees weren't overtopped -- they were breached. In a breach the levees rupture; they are rent open rather than merely drowned. Tears open in the earthen walls and the levees give way, their structural integrity

dangerously compromised.¹²³ In the 24 hours after Katrina made landfall, there were 28 levee breaches in New Orleans. And the damage continued to accumulate: ultimately the number of breaches in the days following the storm reached 50.¹²⁴

Of the approximately one million people who lived in New Orleans when Katrina hit, about 100,000 remained in the city during the storm. People stayed for many reasons, including the ride-it-out culture that is so much a part of New Orleans tradition. Bravado, the sense that the Crescent City was blessed and would not be wiped out, and the desire to protect homes from looters were also compelling reasons to stay. But many of those who remained did so because they lacked the resources to evacuate. Katrina hit at the end of the month, when September's government cheques were still several days away. Many people simply didn't have the money to get out, or were too old and infirm to leave easily. Those remaining in the city when the levees broke sought refuge on whatever high ground they could reach. After Katrina passed, most believed the danger was over, and were caught unawares by the levee failures. Many who rode out the storm in their homes climbed into their attics when the levees broke, and those who could broke through onto the roof when the water threatened to drown them in their attics.¹²⁵ Most of New Orleans was now "a lake to the horizon, broken only by roof peaks and highway ramps," stranding virtually everyone who had remained in the city during the storm

¹²³ Investigators concluded that in Hurricane Katrina, most levee breaches were caused by violent overtopping and erosion; in some cases, such as the 17th Street Canal, overtopping caused the concrete floodwall to tear away from the levee it sat on, creating a rupture in the earthen wall below (Walsh).

¹²⁴ The reasons for these failures are engineering errors: the use of fine sand rather than thick clay in levee construction; deferred and negligent levee system maintenance; and the fact that New Orleans' levees and floodwalls were simply not high enough to hold back a serious storm surge of Katrina's magnitude. Forensic reports showed that the Corps used inadequate materials and built to very conservative estimates of potential storm severity, rather than building for a devastating hurricane. Breach, the Corps admitted, was due to "design failure" and not a hurricane. In 2006, the Corps acknowledged, "We have now concluded we had problems with the design of the structure" (Walsh).

¹²⁵ Statistics on the approximately 1,400 New Orleanians who died in Katrina show that most of the victims were elderly and lived near a major levee break: "About two-thirds either drowned or died from illness or injury brought on by being trapped in houses surrounded by water. The rest died from maladies or injuries suffered in or exacerbated by an arduous evacuation -- or an inability to evacuate quickly enough...Neither race nor gender made anyone more likely to die, only a failure to evacuate and a location near a levee breach. Emergency preparedness experts and government officials say the data reinforces the dire need for continuous improvement in the government's evacuation apparatus, particularly for the area's most frail, poor and often hardest-to-motivate residents" (Schleifstein).

(Cooper 146). Whether in their own homes or designated sanctuaries, when the levees broke most Katrina survivors were trapped, waiting for rescue from their flooded refuge, many without adequate food or water, in the rising heat, with children, the sick and elderly. The streets were filled not merely with water, but with sewage, chemicals and gasoline.

Those who fled to the city's "refuge of last resort" -- the Louisiana Superdome -- found the facility overrun, undersupplied, unsecured and damaged by Katrina's high winds. The storm tore holes in the arena roof which let in rain, flooding the floor. Power failed on Monday, and with it both lights and air conditioning. The following day, the plumbing stopped working. No portable toilets had been delivered, although the Superdome at its height housed 20,000 people. The arena was also inadequately stocked: there was not enough food or water and little medical care for the many high-needs residents who sought refuge there, following the Mayor's mandatory evacuation order. Without adequate medical aid, some of the aged and ill asylees died. Corpses remained uncollected, and the buses promised for evacuation did not come. The Superdome, although on high ground, was surrounded by flooded streets. Katrina victims thus waited in over 100° heat, with little or no food and water, corpses left where they were, for rescue.¹²⁶ "It was truly like being in a live sewer," Louis Cataldic, the Louisiana State Medical Examiner said of the Superdome in the week after Katrina hit. "Special needs people were very sick. People who came in died. It was a horrific time" (Lee). The nearby New Orleans Convention Center was even more poorly provisioned, although undamaged by the storm. Intended to serve as a depot, where flood victims would wait briefly for transportation out of the city, the Convention Center instead became another 'refuge of last resort,' eventually housing 19,000 people. With no preparations in place to turn the convention hall into a shelter, the Convention Center was merely a roof until September 2 when the National Guard arrived to provide both order and provisions. On August 31, Governor Blanco ordered an evacuation of all of New Orleans, including the

¹²⁶ One of the most striking images of this time is a photograph of an elderly African-American woman, sitting in a wheelchair outside the Superdome with an American flag draped over her head. Several critics have compared the image to Dorothea Lange's iconic Dust Bowl photograph 'Migrant Mother.'

Superdome and Convention Center. But despite this directive, and the brutal conditions in the city, the last Superdome and Convention Centre refugees were not evacuated until September 4, when buses transported the evacuees to the Houston Astrodome -- six days after Hurricane Katrina made landfall and a full week after the Superdome opened its doors as a shelter of last resort.

About 1,800 people died in Katrina. 60,000 others were rescued by the Coast Guard, government agencies and many private citizens. 300,000 homes were destroyed or rendered unlivable in the storm and many thousands of New Orleanians were evacuated to Texas and other parts of the country. It wasn't until Monday, September 5 that the final levee breach -- at the 17th Street Canal -- was closed. Once this last breach was stopped up, New Orleans' water pumps started up again. In all, some parts of New Orleans remained underwater for three weeks. The damage was devastating: it was months before power, sewage and water systems were restored to many parts of the city. As FEMA supervisor Leo Bosner notes, a hurricane hitting New Orleans had long been on FEMA's list of the most possible catastrophic events on American soil -- a list which also included the use of biological weapons and a nuclear bomb (Cooper 103). In Spike Lee's *When the Levees Broke*, hurricane survivor Florence Jackson laments the absence of asylum both during and after Katrina. "Where is my government?" she asks. "I'm so disappointed."

In the years since Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, many writers, musicians and artists have responded to the disaster, attempting to grasp not just the hurricane, but as Spike Lee put it, what happened "when the levees broke." Commentators on Katrina have consistently treated a wide archive of texts as representative of the catastrophe. The *Journal of American Studies'* dedicated issue on the hurricane includes articles on visual artist Kara Walker's silhouettes; crime fiction novels and a television show -- *K-Ville*, the short-lived FOX-TV crime drama -- set in post-Katrina New Orleans; collections of photographs taken during the disaster; and catastrophe conspiracy theories. This chapter takes a similarly eclectic approach, reading acclaimed crime fiction writer James Lee Burke's short story 'Jesus Out to Sea'; Dave Eggers' *Zeitoun* -- a non-fictional account of the experiences of a Syrian-American in post-deluge New Orleans; Spike Lee's award-

winning documentary *When the Levees Broke*; and the Katrina-inspired graffiti of street artist Banksy. As Hurricane Katrina is still only very recent history, there is not yet a critical consensus on the cultural production of the catastrophe: no one is yet sure what is great and what is ephemeral. And the archive is not yet complete; there are presumably more Katrina stories yet to be told. The texts under discussion here are in many ways representative; certainly, asylum's consequentiality is particularly apparent in this archive. James Lee Burke's 'Jesus Out to Sea,' for example, clearly exhibits features of asylum discussed in earlier chapters, but it also extends beyond conventional representations of asylum as shelter -- either failed or operational. In Burke's short story, the imaginary register of asylum is figured as not just competitive with, but lethal to, material refuge.

'Jesus Out to Sea': The Drowning of Asylum

From Chicago to New Orleans
 From the muscle to the bone
 From the shotgun shack to the Superdome
 There ain't no help, the cavalry stayed home
 There ain't no one hearing the bugle blowin' ...
 Wherever this flag is flown
 We take care of our own

--Bruce Springsteen, 'We Take Care of Our Own'

James Lee Burke is an acclaimed crime fiction writer whose works are often set in Louisiana. In the immediate aftermath of Katrina, Burke was commissioned by *Esquire* magazine to write a piece of short fiction about the disaster. The result is 'Jesus Out to Sea,' a short story published in *Esquire* in April 2006, six months after the hurricane. Although it is a Katrina text, the story opens not with the hurricane, but with the unnamed narrator's memories of New Orleans and of his closest friends -- brothers named Tony and Miles. The three grew up together in the Ninth Ward, went to Vietnam together, came home and fell apart together. A decorated and traumatized war hero, Tony "[a]me

back from Vietnam with helicopter blades still thopping inside his head" (219). Miles and the narrator are jazz musicians who became crack addicts when the drug ravaged New Orleans in the 1980s. The story is set in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The levees have broken, and Miles and the narrator are trapped on the narrator's roof, stranded in the flooded Ninth Ward. Not entirely without resources, the two men have a small boat and several gallons of water, and plan to wait for nightfall to escape the roof and row for high ground.

In significant ways, sanctuary in 'Jesus Out to Sea' reflects the theory of asylum laid out in earlier chapters. As we have seen, refuge has both material and imagined instantiations. The material register of sanctuary is evident in Weedpatch -- the government camp in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. Weedpatch is where the Joads find vital refuge: food, shelter, and protection from the violent California State Police. But asylum is not limited to this concrete form; it is part of the national mythology. Thus refuge is both the immigrant's arrival on Ellis Island and the belief in America as asylum extant. In this imaginary register, the nation is refuge incarnate, and it is America, personified in Emma Lazarus's 'The New Colossus' as "Mother of Exiles," where those who "yearn to breathe free" finally will (Lazarus 1221). Both these material and imaginary instantiations of refuge are evident in 'Jesus Out to Sea.' But in Burke's short story, material refuge is particularly significant as it is both compromised and even vacated. Invoked only to be destabilized and ultimately elided, this fractured depiction of material sanctuary suggests that asylum is hazardous as well as sheltering.

A path to refuge literally sounds throughout 'Jesus Out to Sea': Coast Guard helicopters thud overhead, and the narrator reports that rescuers are taking out the injured, elderly and children first, heroically "flying without rest" (223). This substantive, material refuge saves lives, and the mode of asylum here -- thudding helicopters overhead -- is both a visual and aural reminder of potential refuge. Yet this manifest material refuge is almost immediately compromised. In contrast to its idealized form, material asylum in Burke's short story is imperfect and limited. Despite the presence of the Coast Guard, asylum in 'Jesus Out to Sea' is far from assured. Indeed, the potential sanctuary promised by distant rescue vehicles is inherently deficient:

Miles and me both know how it's going to go. We've seen it before -- the slick coming out of the molten sun, right across the canopy...wounded grunts waiting in an LZ that North Vietnamese regulars are about to overrun. You can't get everybody home, Chuck. That's just the way it slides down the pipe sometimes. (223-4)

Notably, the failure of refuge here is not ascribed to the rescuers; elsewhere the narrator says of the Coast Guard helicopter teams, "I love those guys" (223). Instead, in 'Jesus Out to Sea' refuge itself is incomplete. Through no fault of the heroic would-be rescuers, asylum is by nature fragmentary and partial. Everybody doesn't make it home, and "[t]hat's just the way it slides down the pipe sometimes." Here the narrator articulates a remarkably un-American notion: that self-reliance is not always determinative. Sanctuary cannot be made whole here through effort or will. Nor does labour assure perfect refuge. The Coast Guard cannot try hard enough to save everyone. This depiction of imperfect asylum implies that refuge is not made partial by flawed implementation. Asylum's insufficiency is innate, as is evident in the fact that the text assigns no blame, and proposes no redress. Burke's narrator does not suggest that everybody doesn't make it home because of poor emergency planning, or inadequate levee maintenance. Instead, this passage suggests that material refuge, whether in Vietnam or New Orleans, whether in war or natural disaster, is inherently incomplete.

But in 'Jesus Out to Sea,' even such provisional material refuge does not stand. Despite the narrator's acknowledgement of asylum's imperfection, the text nevertheless implies that *somebody* makes it home. The fact that "[e]verybody" doesn't get there suggests that some do. And the narrator believes he knows the identity of these priority evacuees. "They're taking children and old and sick people out first," he says (223). However, this faith in rescue triage is subverted -- and gruesomely so. Even before the narrator makes this declaration, he has already seen the corpse of "a diapered black baby in a tree" (222). The justification of imperfect refuge -- of the failure to get everybody home -- is bankrupted here. The rationale that although everyone can't escape the neediest will be evacuated is thus refuted. Following Agamben's *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, we can read this display of abject bodies as evidence of the erasure

of citizenship. For Agamben, Hurricane Katrina's revelation of the worthlessness of life is not exceptional. A baby's body caught in a tree, refugees stranded at the Superdome without food, water or shelter, corpses uncollected in their midst: this macabre spectacle does not signify a rupture in the fabric of the state. It is instead the exposure of the normative. And 'Jesus Out to Sea' endorses this insistence on the permanence of dispossession, as the narrator's belief in organized triage is itself made fantasy here. For even those who do escape are not guaranteed sanctuary. In another subversion of the promise of material refuge, the narrator believes that the children, ill and elderly who are rescued by Coast Guard helicopters will "get home." Stranded on his roof, the narrator doesn't know what the reader does: that those 'rescued' refugees are likely headed for the Superdome -- a "refuge of last resort" that is itself a zone of hazard. In myriad ways, then, material sanctuary, already partial and incomplete, is further subverted here. Indeed, material refuge is so destabilized in Burke's short story that it becomes a kind of imaginary. In 'Jesus Out to Sea,' even the most basic elements of material sanctuary -- the rescue of some, not all; salvation of the neediest; and sanctuary that is shelter rather than hazard -- are rendered fantasy. Thus there is a doubled imaginary at work here. Imagined refuge -- the narrator's dream of Tony and unreserved sanctuary -- is accompanied by a relegation of all material asylum to the realm of fantasy. Even imperfect, conditional, and partial refuge, rationalized through limited resources and the effort of Coast Guard who "fly without rest," falters here (223). Material asylum is steadily dismantled in 'Jesus Out to Sea,' and ultimately translated from imperfect reality into fantasy.

This material instantiation of asylum, both extant and imperfect, functions in a surprising way in Burke's short story. As is evident in *The Grapes of Wrath*, differing visions of refuge are not merely at odds in disaster narratives: they are mutually exclusive. Weedpatch, the government camp which offers the Joads material refuge, saves the family's life. However, the camp's very existence extinguishes the California State Police and Fruit Growers' vision of refuge, in which the Okies are expelled from the state. Weedpatch's asylum eradicates the very refuge which the California State Police labour to create. This tension between competing visions of asylum is also evident in 'Jesus Out to Sea.' Stranded on the narrator's roof, the two men have a boat which Miles

rowed over when the flooding began. The boat is tied to the roof where they await rescue, and something else as well. When the narrator considers sailing the boat to higher ground, where helicopters can land and pick them up, Miles urges patience:

'Wait till dark,' he says.

'Why?'

'There won't be as many people who want the boat,' he says.

I look at him and feel ashamed of both of us. (222)

Miles counsels the narrator to wait for the cover of night so that they will be less visible, and less likely to be swamped by others who want into the small craft and the sanctuary it represents. The narrator's shame at this strategic survivalism extends to them both: Miles for voicing the grim tactic and himself for consenting to it. In this exchange the men recognize both the scarcity of refuge and the necessity of protecting it. Even though it shames the narrator, this necessity endures. And his shame is a marker of regret not only at his actions, but also at the reality of limited resources. There is simply not enough asylum to go around. Miles' strategy of resource- and self-preservation is an echo of the narrator's stark assertion of the limits of material asylum: "You can't get everybody home" (224). In the brief discussion about the rowboat, the stranded men are not simply acknowledging the delimited nature of material asylum -- they are also enacting it. The plan to wait until dark to row to safety *generates* inadequate refuge rather than merely depicting it. Here Miles and the narrator are implicated in the inherent insufficiency of material asylum. In 'Jesus Out to Sea,' however, this competition is not only a contest over limited resources, or rival visions of asylum. Instead, in Burke's short story material refuge comes into conflict with imagined refuge. Rather than one version of material refuge in competition with another, here the two instantiations of sanctuary are themselves made mutually exclusive. This lethality -- in which imagined asylum extinguishes material sanctuary -- demonstrates the hazards of refuge rather than its capacity to shelter.

In 'Jesus Out to Sea,' as in other disaster narratives, material refuge is both present yet imperfect -- asylum cannot be secured for all. It is exactly this delimited nature that is rewritten in the narrator's dream of refuge. In this imaginary instantiation of sanctuary, the selective and partial nature of asylum is countered by a vision of total capaciousness. After listening to the helicopters on their rescue missions the narrator falls asleep and dreams of perfected refuge:

I see Tony standing in the door of a Jolly Green, the wind flattening his clothes against his muscular physique. I see the Jolly Green coming over the houses, loading everyone on board, dropping bright yellow inflatable life rafts to people, showering water bottles and C-rats down to people who had given up hope.
(224-5)

In this dream the narrator imagines idealized refuge. In contrast to his waking knowledge that "[y]ou can't get everybody home," here he dreams of absolute sanctuary, uncompromised and all-embracing (224). This narrative device in which imaginary refuge is expressed in a dream while material asylum is located in waking life also occurs in Dave Eggers' *Zeitoun*, as we shall see in this chapter's conclusion. And notably, it is only in sleep that both Burke's narrator and *Zeitoun* can experience this imaginary instantiation of asylum. This stands in contrast to Tom Joad, for whom in *The Grapes of Wrath* the imaginary is cognitive: he "thinks" idealized asylum rather than dreams it.

Asylum, in this imaginary instantiation, welcomes "everyone on board." Even those who wait their turn for helicopter rescue are not abandoned, as food, water and lifeboats are provided to the stranded. In this vision, then, asylum is not simply present -- it is also efficient and organized. These rescuers are prepared; they have emergency supplies in such abundance that water bottles shower down on the stranded. It's also significant that Tony brings more than the apparatus of survival. While he delivers water, food and rafts, in the narrator's dream, Tony saves not only the lives of New Orleanians at very real risk of dying, but also "people who had given up hope" (225). Imagined refuge, then, promises not just physical survival, but another kind of sustenance as well. Despair is sated as well as thirst here. In the most fantastical element of this dream of asylum,

flood refugees believe that help will come: that they are not abandoned to their fates. The abundance of the narrator's vision of imaginary asylum stands in stark contrast to the strictly delimited nature of material refuge in 'Jesus Out to Sea.'

As in other disaster narratives, this vision of perfect refuge is clearly a dream. It is unmistakably set off from the waking, realistic world. But in 'Jesus Out to Sea' material and imaginary refuge don't merely exist in different registers. In Burke's short story the two instantiations of asylum are also at odds with each other. For it is while the narrator dreams of Tony arriving with helicopter and raft that material refuge recedes: "But I'm dreaming. I wake up with a start...The sun is gone from the sky, the water is still rising...The painter to our boat hangs from the air vent, cut by a knife. Our boat is gone, our water jugs along with it" (225). This moment vividly embodies the competition between the imaginary and material registers of refuge. The dream of asylum is not only revealed as illusory and fantastic here -- the dream itself is hazardous. Falling into imaginary refuge -- even dreaming the dream -- is perilous. And the narrator knows this, even as he falls asleep: "My head sinks on my chest and I fall asleep, even though I know I'm surrendering my vigilance at the worst possible time" (224). In this scene, it is not asylum itself which is depicted as hazardous, but the dream of refuge which imperils. Here the imaginary register actually extinguishes material refuge. The boat -- that concrete route to safety -- disappears precisely because of the narrator's dream of perfect asylum. This lethality is unexpected, for in disaster narratives, material asylum conventionally inspires imaginary refuge. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, for instance, it is Weedpatch that nurtures Tom Joad's vision of expansionist asylum. But in 'Jesus Out to Sea,' experience of the material register of refuge does not result in a reinvestment in the imaginary. Instead, the dream of asylum destroys material refuge. Burke's short story thus constitutes an indictment of dreaming itself. The fantasy of potential refuge is a killing thing here. And yet the dream itself is remarkably modest, and indeed takes the prosaic form of a bureaucratic fantasy.

Perfected refuge as represented in 'Jesus Out to Sea' is of a very particular kind: in an evocation of Herbert Hoover's idealized asylum, it is decidedly bureaucratic. A key element of this prosaic genre is the mundane business of transportation. Notably for a

flood narrative, a boat is not asylum extant here. Both the material and imaginary instantiations of refuge depict a different mode of escape: the Jolly Green. In both registers, refuge takes the form of this military helicopter used specifically in search and rescue. Thus the imaginary is not entirely fantastical in Burke's text; it is not a vision of a utopically displaced world, but a perfected dream made of the same stuff as material sanctuary. The narrator's fantasy is, in this way, an expansion of concrete asylum. It imagines a redeployment of the Coast Guard choppers he sees and hears in the sky above the flooded city. And the Jolly Greens represent another commonality between imagined and material refuge. In both registers, asylum is imagined as a mode rather than a destination. The narrator does not -- or cannot -- imagine himself beyond the moment of rescue by helicopter. He does not dream of his home restored, or of safety in another, unflooded city. Instead, refuge in 'Jesus Out to Sea' consists of dreams of vehicles -- of the choppers and boats that will get refugees to refuge, and not asylum itself.

And significantly, Miles' rowboat is depicted not as escape itself, but instead as the mode by which to gain high ground. Once there, the men can be rescued by helicopter. Ultimate refuge, then, will arrive via the Jolly Greens. The boat is merely the means by which they make themselves available for a flight to safety. This distinction between boat and aircraft -- that is, in the mode of refuge -- is notable, for it places asylum firmly in the hands of military officialdom. The narrator believes that he and Miles will be rescued by Coast Guard choppers. At no point does he suggest sailing the rowboat anywhere except to dry land for rescue by helicopter. For the narrator of 'Jesus Out To Sea,' then, externally assured bureaucracy is the guarantor of asylum. Burke's short story is decidedly not a didactic tale recounting how to pull yourself up by your bootstraps and thereby survive a hurricane. Indeed, the abrupted form of the text's flood narrative -- opening with the men stranded on the roof -- elides any account of self-made rescue. Presumably their presence on the roof -- alive, with a boat and bottled water in tow -- is the result of self-sufficiency. Presumably, the men have thus far saved themselves. But the elision of these narrative details, of the story of how they got there, emphasises the text's insistence on asylum's externality. Refuge here is secured by bureaucracy and not by individual heroism or pluck. The narrator can neither dream of nor enact his own salvation here. This insistence on constrained individual agency is a

concession to the sheer scale of Hurricane Katrina. In 'Jesus Out to Sea,' the American narrative of self-sufficiency is rendered mute by a hurricane. In such conditions, the narrator simply cannot save himself. Asylum here thus constitutes a trenchant critique of American individualism. The self-reliance and aspiration which are the essential vectors of the American narrative of individualism are subverted in 'Jesus Out to Sea.'

Just as individual ingenuity and rescue are suspicious in 'Jesus Out to Sea,' so too does the text resist the depiction of an idealized local community. Although several fellow flood refugees float by the rooftop, calling out to the narrator and Miles, the text never suggests that these passers-by could be a route to sanctuary. The New Orleanians who drift through the toxic water, holding on to inner tubes or driftwood, are themselves catastrophically stranded, and thus can function only as bearers of news, not aid. And even this news is often misinformation: "A white guy floating by on an inner tube has a battery-powered radio propped on his stomach tells us snipers have shot a policeman in the head" (222). The only way out, in both the imaginary and material registers of asylum in 'Jesus Out to Sea,' is the Coast Guard helicopters. For just as the individual's capacity is thwarted by Katrina, so too is the body politic. The local corporate is no more capable of rescue than are Miles and the narrator. It's not Herbert Hoover's Main Street, but Pennsylvania Avenue that can save New Orleans here. Salvation exists not in individual agency or local communitarianism, and is instead insistently located in the promise of external rescue. This insistence on military helicopter as opposed to rowboat as the means of refuge signifies external asylum in another way as well. In New Orleans, the flood victims wait for rescue that literally descends from the sky. In theatrical terms, then, the narrator and Miles await a *deus ex machina* -- for a last-minute, external resolution to an impossible narrative problem.

Bureaucratic refuge has another key characteristic. In addition to its decided externality, this dream of asylum also imagines that government works. The rescue the narrator imagines is one which depends not only on heroic Coast Guard rescuers and a powerful American military, but more simply on government agencies that operate effectively. For the narrator's vision of imaginary refuge to become material asylum, rescue efforts would have had to have been coordinated between federal, state and local

officials.¹²⁷ Resources would have been marshaled and deployed in a coordinated manner, according to an efficient and effective plan. In order to assure anything like universal sanctuary, government would, in short, have to have behaved nothing like it did in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Despite its remarkably unromantic genre then, the bureaucratic fantasy of asylum in 'Jesus Out to Sea' is just as fantastical as Tom Joad's vision of a Jeffersonian agrarian paradise in *The Grapes of Wrath*. And efficient, effective government aid is just as out of reach for Miles and the narrator as independent farming is for the Dust Bowl Okies.

While asylum is bureaucratic in 'Jesus Out to Sea,' it is decidedly not civilian. Instead, perfected asylum is assured by military might. The tools normally deployed in pursuit of American 'muscular' foreign policy are instead put to work on home soil here. One effect of this military valence is of course that it converts New Orleans into a war zone, and Crescent City residents into soldiers. Indeed, in the narrator's mind this conversion edges towards conflation. When he sees Coast Guard helicopters flying low over the flooded city, he conflates the rescue of injured and elderly New Orleanians with that of "wounded grunts" in Vietnam (223). Imagined asylum is explicitly militarized here, in both the depiction of New Orleans as a war zone and New Orleanians as soldiers, as well as the use of military slang. The Jolly Greens and the "C-rats" -- fully cooked wet rations designed for use in combat -- also make it clear that rescue in Hurricane Katrina is a military operation. Perhaps most significantly, military might is literally embodied in Tony's "muscular physique" (225). The hero-soldier who secures asylum, Tony's chiseled torso embodies the muscularity of a fantasy of American military might. In 'Jesus Out to Sea,' the imagined rescuer is literalized military brawn.

Military Might: Armed Refuge in *When the Levees Broke* and 'Jesus Out to Sea'

Wouldn't you loot, if you didn't have the loot?
Baby needed food and you stuck on the roof

¹²⁷ There are many accounts of the bureaucratic and policy failures which contributed to Katrina and the levee breaks; one astute reading is *Disaster: Hurricane Katrina and the Failure of Homeland Security* by Christopher Cooper and Robert Block.

Helicopter swooped down just to get a scoop
 Through his telescopic lens but he didn't scoop you
 The next five days, no help ensued.

--'Minority Report,' Jay-Z

This vision of asylum attained through military might is echoed in Spike Lee's documentary *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*. Notably, however, Lee's film depicts military might securing not imagined but material refuge. Through interviews with survivors and commentators, the film depicts the chaos that followed the levee failures, including worsening conditions at the Superdome. Pieces of the arena's roof are torn away, allowing rainwater to collect inside. Plumbing and electricity fail, food and water run out, and with inadequate medical aid some of the aged and ill asylees die. Corpses remain uncollected, and the buses promised for evacuation do not come. Tired of waiting in the relentless late summer heat, a group of Superdome refugees begin to walk out of Orleans Parish to meet the promised buses -- only to be turned away at gunpoint at the county line. The Superdome becomes increasingly nightmarish, and serves in *When the Levees Broke* as a symbol of government failure in Hurricane Katrina.

Lee's depiction of conditions at the arena radically shifts with the arrival of US Army Lieutenant General Russel Honoré. Honoré was the commander of Joint Task Force Katrina, an initiative by FEMA and the Department of Defence established on Wednesday 31 August, two days after Katrina made landfall in Louisiana. In *When the Levees Broke*, Honoré's arrival on Saturday 3 September is the turning point in the Superdome narrative. The film's music, previously dirge-like when depicting the overrun arena, now shifts to a sprightly military march, up-tempo and brisk. Honoré himself is depicted as a hero, individuated from the rest of the army. This individuation is evident in Lee's cinematography: the camera follows Honoré as he strides out into the streets of New Orleans on first arrival, ordering National Guardsmen to lower the weapons aimed at people in the streets. "Weapons down, goddamnit!" Honoré shouts at the soldiers. "I'm not going to tell you again." By directing the National Guard to lower their guns, Honoré re-casts the Hurricane Katrina disaster narrative. With this action, New Orleanians are no longer the presumptive perpetrators, against whom weapons are

already trained in anticipation of threat.¹²⁸ This is of course a highly racialized moment. Many critics have addressed the gap between how white and black New Orleanians were described -- by the press, the government and by their fellow citizens -- when foraging for supplies in the aftermath of Katrina. Whites seen leaving stores with armfuls of goods were often characterized as survivors, while African-Americans were called looters. When military might is restrained in this scene, Katrina survivors are re-cast not as criminals but as victims. Honoré himself is also re-cast, as is, by extension, the entire United States military. In directing the soldiers to lower their weapons, he underscores his orders not with a gun of his own but with the chain of command. Five days after Katrina made landfall, with tens of thousands still waiting for rescue, a Lieutenant General in the United States Army becomes the defender of the people.¹²⁹ He is a recognizable hero of the disaster narrative. Lee's film reinforces this narrative; by the day after Honoré's arrival and intervention, buses had evacuated all Katrina victims from the Superdome. In the film, the disorder and suffering of the earlier scenes at the arena is redressed in Lee's film by Honoré and his authoritative, corrective actions. He both controls and embodies the American military here: he puts things to right. The military, once he is introduced, acts as it should. Roles corrected, Katrina survivors are now victims in need of protection and not perpetrators in need of surveillance. Having seen the Lieutenant General order weapons down, the long-delayed emptying of the Superdome is attributed to him by implication. In *When the Levees Broke*, as in 'Jesus

¹²⁸ In *On Floods and Photo Ops* (2012), Paul Martin Lester examines two such photographs and compares the media's depiction of the images. Michael Eric Dyson also addresses this gap in *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster* (2006), as do hip hop artists Public Enemy in "Hell No We Ain't Alright!": "Racism in the news, still one-sided views/ Sayin whites find food/ Pray for the National Guard who be ready to shoot/ Because they be sayin us blacks loot/ (What is your boy "Son of a Bush" doin?) [*laughing*]/ (NUTTIN!)" (2006). Thus when Lt. Gen. Honoré orders the National Guard to lower their weapons in *When the Levees Broke*, he intervenes in this dynamic. And as Honoré describes himself as "African-American Creole," this is an especially evocative moment of a black soldier intervening in the racialized criminalization of Katrina survivors, many of whom are African-American.

¹²⁹ As *Times-Picayune* editor Jed Horne notes, by this point in the coverage of Katrina, the media wanted a star, "someone on whom to focus the yearning for effective leadership that seemed so sorely lacking...And briefly, at least...the media had their man in Lt. Gen Russel Honoré...In a landscape crawling with double-talk, he was blunt, action-oriented, and, after a delayed start, capable of results" (103). Honoré is of course a complicated hero; Lee's depiction of a one-day miracle of arrival and evacuation is highly condensed. The Lieutenant General was in fact named commander of the task force three days earlier, on August 31. And a FEMA official asserts that Honoré cancelled a plan to evacuate the Superdome using helicopters by Tuesday evening -- four days before the arena was actually evacuated, by bus, under Honoré's command (Horne 103).

Out to Sea,' asylum is secured by American military might represented by an individual: a powerful soldier who cuts through inaction and solves problems quickly, leaving no one behind. And it's notable that even the fantasy of America's military as guarantor of asylum is delimited here. Both texts depict an individual hero rather than institutional valor. It is Honoré and Tony, rather than the United States Army, who are the rescuers here. Even in the realm of fantasy, *When the Levees Broke* and 'Jesus Out to Sea' cannot imagine the American military as corporate sanctuary. Refuge is assured by individual soldiers, and not the institution.

Just as righteous military might is embodied in Lt. General Russel Honoré in *When the Levees Broke*, so too does Tony represent armed America in 'Jesus Out to Sea.' Both texts depict the United States military as a mode of refuge in the midst of disaster. And in doing so, these texts constitute fantasies not only of refuge, but also of American power. The immediate problem that cannot be solved in these disaster narratives, the result that cannot be achieved, is the rescue of Americans trapped in arenas and on their roofs in New Orleans. But the ghost behind the military discourse -- the Jolly Green and the C-rats, heroic generals and memories of Vietnam -- is what the American military cannot do on the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan.¹³⁰ Even as the narrator and Miles are trapped in the Ninth Ward, in August 2005, soldiers like them are fighting and being thwarted in the Middle East. Two and a half years after George W. Bush's infamous 'Mission Accomplished' speech of May of 2003, victory remained elusive. The depiction in Katrina disaster narratives of idealized military power, then, is also a fantasy of America's ability to project military might internationally. The nation's capacity to dominate nature and battlefield is conflated here, in a fantasy of effectual armed power. These texts dream of an American military that can act quickly and effectively, achieve its goals and rescue victims -- whether of a domestic flood or a foreign dictator. And success at these goals, in both New Orleans and Fallujah, is fantastical. It is only in the imaginary register that refuge is secured by military might in 'Jesus Out to Sea.' Tony is himself a fantasy; the narrator reminds Miles that his brother was in fact killed by the Drug Enforcement Agency. "They blew him out of the water," he says, "off Velacruz"

¹³⁰ James Lee Burke's short story 'Mist' represents this doubled trauma. It tells the story of Lisa Guillory, a woman whose soldier husband is killed in Iraq, and whose infant son dies in Hurricane Katrina.

(226). In its concluding paragraphs, 'Jesus Out to Sea' not only vacates the possibility of military rescue, but also questions the endurance of both material and imaginary asylum. Like Tony, killed by the DEA, in its final images Burke's short story suggests that asylum itself may simply have drifted out to sea.

Material refuge -- fractured and partial though it may be -- often functions as a zone of reinvestment in imaginary asylum. Conventionally, the failure of material sanctuary does not result in the abandonment of the dream of refuge. Thus although the Joads are ejected from Weedpatch in *The Grapes of Wrath*, it is precisely the government camp which inspires Tom Joad's dream of enduring, permanent sanctuary. As discussed in earlier chapters, material refuge, despite its provisional, temporary nature, facilitates reinvestment in the imaginary instantiation of asylum. In 'Jesus Out to Sea,' however, this reinvestment falters. Material refuge does not inspire a dream of perfected asylum; instead, material refuge is destroyed by imaginary asylum. The possibility of real refuge is inexorably dismantled and relegated to the realm of fantasy. Exiled from reality, the material is made imaginary here. Concrete refuge is no more. Burke's short story suggests that there is no such thing as material asylum -- that all refuge is mythic. Notably, both registers of refuge are instead granted metaphorical agency by which they themselves abandon the disaster-scape of flood-ravaged New Orleans.

After their boat is stolen, Miles and the narrator wait in vain for rescue. The water -- or rather, the toxic soup -- is rising around them, and the house they're stranded on begins to collapse. In the final paragraphs of the story, and the final minutes of the characters' lives, the narrator reports, "a funny thing happens. Floating right along next to us is the wood carving of Jesus on his Cross, from the stucco church at the end of my street. He's on his back, his arms stretched out, the waves sliding across his skin" (227-8). Earlier in the story, the body of the priest from the same church also floated by "on his stomach, his arms stretched out by his sides, like he was looking for something" (220). The floating away of both the priest -- who chose to stay with his trapped parishioners rather than flee New Orleans -- and the carved Jesus unites the material and imaginary instantiations of asylum in a concluding image. Both the human representative of God's work and the idealized representation of the divine are lost in the storm. Neither

the material -- the human securer of refuge -- nor the ideal -- Christ himself -- survive the hurricane. This drifting away of a priest *and* a god, of a disciple *and* a deity suggests an evacuation of all possibilities of sanctuary. Both material and ideal are forsaken here, and through the tide depart New Orleans. Although a rather heavy-handed symbolic gesture, the statue's departure suggests that neither good works nor culture can endure Katrina and the levee break. A post-disaster world thus contains none of the conventional consolation of religion, art or good works. Like the corpse of the black baby caught in a tree, like Miles and the narrator, Christ himself is rendered Agamben's homo sacer here -- he "who may be killed and yet not sacrificed" (8). In Burke's short story, Jesus leaves New Orleans not as humanity's redeemer, but as just another floating corpse.

As the promise of sanctuary departs the disaster-scape of the Crescent City, it is unclear what's left behind. Dave Eggers' *Zeitoun*, the account of a Syrian-American New Orleans resident who is arrested as a suspected terrorist in the immediate aftermath of Katrina, also engages with the question of refuge's endurance. And while 'Jesus Out to Sea' depicts imaginary refuge as hazardous, *Zeitoun* complicates this representation by asserting that asylum is by nature both sheltering and perilous.

***Zeitoun*: From Sheltering to Perilous Asylum**

Let the truth be known
 But they talked that freedom at us
 And didn't even leave a ladder, damn...
 No one's gonna fly down low
 No one's gonna save us now

--'Tie My Hands,' Lil' Wayne

Dave Eggers' *Zeitoun* is a non-fictional account of Abdulrahman Zeitoun's experience of Hurricane Katrina. Zeitoun, a Syrian-American and observant Muslim who lives in New Orleans with his wife and children, owns a contracting business, as well as several rental properties in the Crescent City. When Katrina approaches New Orleans in August 2005,

Abdulrahman decides to remain at home to protect his property while his family evacuates to safety. After the hurricane and levee breaks, Zeitoun's home is partially flooded and he takes refuge on the second floor, but remains in the city. He spends the first days after the disaster guiding his canoe through the flooded streets, rescuing the stranded and delivering them to high ground, and checking on his properties and the homes of his friends.

On Tuesday, 6 September, eight days after Katrina made landfall, Zeitoun and several companions row to one of his rental properties in order to shower and use the building's telephone. While there, the men are arrested and taken to the New Orleans Union Passenger Terminal. Re-named Camp Greyhound, the bus and train depot has been converted into a prison. There Zeitoun is fingerprinted, questioned, and strip-searched. He is not charged with a crime, not permitted to make a phone call or consult legal counsel. He is imprisoned in an outdoor cell made of chain link fencing, and denied medical care for an open wound on his foot. Although Zeitoun is never formally charged, several guards inform him that he is "Taliban" or "Al-Qaeda." After three days, Zeitoun and his companions are transferred to Hunt Correctional Center, a maximum security prison, where he is once again detained, still without charge, legal counsel or a phone call. He eventually convinces a chaplain to contact his wife and tell her where he is, and Kathy Zeitoun learns that although her husband has been cleared of any terrorist action, he has been charged with looting. On September 29, after days of negotiation, and more than four weeks after Katrina hit New Orleans, Abdulrahman Zeitoun is released, and the charges of looting his own home are dropped. His companions who were arrested with him served five and six months respectively at the Hunt Correctional Center, and were also eventually released with all charges dropped.

Although the collision of Hurricane Katrina and the war on terror makes *Zeitoun* an unusual disaster narrative, the text also exhibits many of the genre's familiar conventions, such as the failure of refuge. This failure is particularly evident during Abdulrahman Zeitoun's first three days of captivity, when he is imprisoned at Camp Greyhound -- the makeshift prison built in the New Orleans Union Passenger Terminal, a transportation hub Zeitoun had often visited as a free man. But Zeitoun's imprisonment

isn't just another moment of failed asylum in Hurricane Katrina. Inadequate sanctuary tells a different story: one in which the bus depot is merely flooded and abandoned, and thus serves as a metaphor for the frustrated egress of all the would-be evacuees stranded on rooftops and in the Superdome. *Zeitoun* is not a straightforward narrative of the thwarted search for shelter. The central gesture of Eggers' text is quite different. It tells another story about refuge, one which examines not simply the failure of asylum, but considers the very nature of sanctuary. Camp Greyhound reveals the doubled nature of asylum: refuge is not only a space of shelter, but also a zone of hazard. In Eggers' account, this doubleness is quite literal. *Zeitoun* is, in a bitter irony, imprisoned in a building specifically designed to facilitate mobility: "In essential ways, the station was still the same. There was a Subway franchise, various ticket counters, an information kiosk. But there were no travelers. There were only men and women with guns...and *Zeitoun* and his fellow prisoners" (211-12). The echo of the past in the present is crucial here, for Camp Greyhound is not an original creation. Instead, it clearly consists of the bus depot. Indeed, Camp Greyhound *is* the New Orleans Union Passenger Terminal, just as the depot *is* the prison. The space is simultaneously both sanctuary and detention center, both shelter and hazard. This coexistence is evident in the many elements of the depot which remain in the makeshift jail, for "[i]n essential ways, the station was still the same" (211). Indeed, the text insists upon the twinned nature of the bus depot and prison. Abdulrahman is "brought to the Amtrak counter and fingerprinted...*Zeitoun* had stood in this exact place before while waiting to buy train tickets for friends or employees. Now, while handcuffed and guarded by two soldiers with M-16s, his photograph was being taken" (215). The doubleness of asylum, the palimpsest of the depot-prison, is metaphorical as well as literal: it points us towards the doubled nature of asylum itself. Like the building where Abdulrahman *Zeitoun* is incarcerated, refuge is both shelter and hazard.

Indeed, shelter is co-incident with hazard in this text. The existence of one does not elide or erase the other. A mode of refuge -- transportation -- is made prison here, through the erection of chain-link cages with razor wire crowns. And so the visual analogue for Camp Greyhound is not Banksy's Umbrella Boy, who reaches in vain after shelter always already out of reach. While, like Umbrella Boy, the text laments failed

asylum, in Camp Greyhound *Zeitoun* also does something else. Thus *Zeitoun's* parallel text is Umbrella Girl, who is soaked by a deluge that falls inside of her umbrella. In *Zeitoun* as in Umbrella Girl, refuge does not merely fail, or stray out of reach. Rather, the infrastructure of asylum is revealed as the infrastructure of imprisonment. The station has been converted into a prison, and sanctuary is transposed into incarceration. Asylum is now the zone of hazard, and shelter -- an umbrella and a bus depot -- is made perilous rather than simply bankrupted: "The parking lot, where a dozen buses might normally be parked, had been transformed into a vast outdoor prison" (218). Promised buses -- one of the leitmotifs of Katrina narratives -- are not merely absent here, as in so many accounts of would-be Superdome evacuees. Instead, in Camp Greyhound the latent buses are replaced by a very real prison. In this passage, the material instantiation of asylum is converted into the materiel of hazard.

This doubled nature of asylum is apparent in the remarkable similarities between the zones of hazard and asylum. Counter-intuitively, and counter-narratively, hazard shares many of the characteristics of asylum established earlier in this project. In *Zeitoun*, these echoes are particularly evident during the Camp Greyhound sequence. The extra-legal jail set up in Katrina's aftermath embodies refuge's characteristic features precisely because the two are not opposed but co-identical. Like Weedpatch, the government camp in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Camp Greyhound is not where the story ends; it appears in the middle of the text and thus is interludic and not conclusive. Both camps are zones through which asylees pass, rather than ultimate narrative destinations. And both have strictly patrolled borders. Indeed, the ability to maintain those borders is essential to the camps' survival. Without guards and an exactly delimited perimeter, neither encampment can fulfill its fundamental purpose -- to remain segregated from the outside world. In this sense, Camp Greyhound in particular recalls Agamben's state of exception, which the theorist defines as "not a special kind of law (like the law of war); rather...it is a suspension of the juridical order itself" (5). Agamben notes that this suspension of law is characterized by two developments: "the extension of the military authority's wartime powers into the civil sphere, and...a suspension of the constitution (or of those constitutional norms that protect individual liberties)...[T]he two models end up merging into a single juridical phenomenon that we call the *state of exception*" (5). The

bus depot exists under military power, and is a space in which all juridical rights -- or indeed subjectivity -- are suspended. Yet, like refuge, Camp Greyhound is provisional. In William Faulkner's 'Old Man,' the bayou shack where the Tall Convict finds sanctuary is similarly evanescent; always shadowed by its own end, it is returned to flooded swamp by the 1927 backwater. After Katrina, the makeshift jail in *Zeitoun* reverts to its earlier function as a depot and Camp Greyhound is once more the New Orleans Union Passenger Terminal. Neither site -- of asylum or hazard -- are permanent in these texts. Both expire. Camp Greyhound is also, like Steinbeck's government camp, a version of competitive asylum. Its very existence destroys *Zeitoun*'s hope for refuge, for Abdulrahman's vision of sanctuary and Camp Greyhound are mutually exclusive. Similarly, Weedpatch's very existence obliterates the California State Police's vision of sanctuary, which is defined by the exclusion of Okie migrants.

Perhaps most evocatively, Camp Greyhound, like asylum, exists in both material and imaginary registers. It has mythic as well as concrete instantiations. It is not just an American dream, but a dream of America. Just as asylum's imaginary register dreams the nation as refuge incarnate, perfectly assured by citizenship, so too does the imaginary of hazard depict not just Camp Greyhound, but America writ large. In this imaginary of hazard, America is a zone of peril, not shelter, and American history is a narrative of violent exclusion and not progress and aspiration. Notably, these echoes between Camp Greyhound and Weedpatch, between shelter and hazard, are not nonsensical but inevitable. Hazardous asylum is not a contradiction in terms; it doesn't negate sheltering refuge. Instead, it is the other side of sanctuary. Asylum is always also exclusion. And Camp Greyhound exhibits features of sheltering asylum precisely because of this doubled nature. This doubleness is particularly evident in a mural painted on the walls of Camp Greyhound. When he first arrives at Camp Greyhound, *Zeitoun* waits to be processed. As he sits he considers the mural which wraps around the walls of the station's main waiting area:

In all, the mural was about 120 feet long, and it sought to depict the entire history of Louisiana in particular and the United States generally....it was a startling thing, a dark catalog of subjugation and struggle. The colors were

nightmarish, the lines jagged, the images disturbing. He saw Ku Klux Klan hoods, skeletons...There were images of blue-clad soldiers marching off to war next to mass graves. There were many depictions of the suppression or elimination of peoples -- Native Americans, slaves, immigrants -- and always, nearby, was the artist's idea of the instigators: wealthy aristocrats in powdered wigs, generals in gleaming uniforms, businessmen with bags of money. In one segment, oil derricks stood below a flooded landscape, water engulfing a city (213-14).

Here Abdulrahman Zeitoun sees the imaginary of hazard -- the companion myth to the narrative of sheltering asylum. Just as Emma Lazarus's 'The New Colossus' constitutes a national imaginary in which America itself is "Mother of Exiles" from whose hand glows "world-wide welcome," so too is the Camp Greyhound mural a narrative of similar scale (1221).¹³¹ The fresco recounts the history not only of New Orleans, or of Louisiana, but, the text tells us, of "the United States generally." This scope lays claim to an alternate American imaginary. The mural depicts America beyond the flood zone, beyond the immediate context of Hurricane Katrina, and reads American history itself as the history of hazard. And this history is made urgently present in the person of Abdulrahman Zeitoun. As he sits in Camp Greyhound, a prisoner stripped of rights, Zeitoun is the heir to America's history as hazard extant.

This history of dispossession is in many ways a shared one. Zeitoun is an extra-legal prisoner in the bus depot -- he exists in a state of exception, surrounded by a mural depicting "the suppression or elimination of peoples" including Native Americans and slaves. And indeed, both African- and Arab/Muslim- Americans are criminalized in the

¹³¹ The American past represented in the mural is of course precisely the past which is often elided in orthodox histories of America. The mural depicts the -- if not untold -- then under-told chapters of the nation's past. As Howard Zinn notes in *A People's History of the United States*, "Every American schoolchild learns about the Boston Massacre. But who learns about the massacre of 600 men, women and children of the Pequot tribe in New England in 1637? Or the massacre -- in the midst of the Civil War -- of hundreds of Indian families at Sand Creek, Colorado, by U.S. soldiers?" (686).

popular mind.¹³² As Valorie Thomas notes, Abdulrahman Zeitoun himself acknowledges this commonality: "Since the attacks in New York, [Zeitoun] would say, every time a crime was committed by a Muslim, that person's faith was mentioned...And what about African Americans? When a crime is committed by a black man, it's mentioned in the first breath: 'An African American man was arrested today'" (37). Yet despite this shared racialized criminality, the representation of Arab/Muslim- and African-Americans differs in consequential ways. Zeitoun's post-Katrina experience both echoes that of many African-Americans, and yet is also distinctly that of an Arab/Muslim. Young black men, for instance, are encoded as particularly menacing, so much so that America has "a collective, acute, national fear of black men engaging in violence" (Russell-Brown 113). African-Americans are often depicted as the perpetrators of property crimes, drug offenses and sexual violence. During Hurricane Katrina, the popular press captioned images of African-Americans leaving stores with supplies as "looters," while photos of white people engaged in the same activity were identified as "residents."¹³³ Similarly, the media reported rampant sexual violence in the immediate aftermath of Katrina -- both in the Superdome and on the streets of New Orleans -- much of which was "grossly overstated" (Russell-Brown 112). In the press, these sexual assaults were racialized, and "became markers of black disorder, chaos and the 'animalistic' nature of New Orleans residents" (Harris and Carbado 100). But while African-American men are understood to commit crimes in groups -- a belief resulting in what Sheryll Cashin calls "[f]ear of blacks in numbers" -- Arab/Muslims are viewed as a threat to the state itself (36). Associated with acts of terrorism rather than individual violent crimes, and with conspiracy rather than opportunistic thugishness, these subjects pose an ontological threat

¹³² I'm following Alsutany's terminology -- 'Arab/Muslim'-- here. She notes that this distinction between ethnicity and religious affiliation is often conflated in popular depictions, a resulting in what Thomas calls the "racialization of Islam" (281).

¹³³ Paul Martin Lester's *On Floods and Photo Ops: How Herbert Hoover and George W. Bush Exploited Catastrophes* (2010) begins with an analysis of two such "looting/finding" photos (ix). Lester's analysis continues with a comparison of two other photos: one of Bush visiting Hurricane Katrina victims in Mississippi and the other of Hoover during the 1927 flood touring a refugee camp in Natchez. Cheryl I. Harris and Devon W. Carbado's 'Loot or Find: Fact or Frame?' also analyses this racialized gap between survivor and criminal.

to not just the republic, but civilization.¹³⁴ Throughout the twentieth century, "Arabs have most often been seen as rich oil sheiks, sultry belly dancers, harem girls, veiled oppressed women, and, most notably, terrorists" (Alsultany 7).¹³⁵ Indeed, for Arab/Muslims, "racial identification is made synonymous with the appellation 'terrorist'" (Thomas 273). While the racialized representation of African-Americans is predicated on a discourse of primitivism, contemporary black culture is not understood as deliberately endangering mainstream American culture. Intent is significant here: Arab/Muslims are read as conspirators who seek nothing less than the downfall of the West. Alsultany notes that post-9/11 movies and television often depict both a "bad" and a "good" Arab/Muslim. Dominant "good" depictions include "the patriotic Arab-American, the Arab American who is the victim of post-9/11 hate crimes, and the 'oppressed Muslim woman'" (102). But even these positive depictions are vexed, for "Arab and Muslim identities are still understood and evaluated primarily in relation to terrorism" (28).¹³⁶ Conflated with terrorists, Arab/Muslims are also frequently represented as inhuman. As Amy Kaplan notes, "the accusation of terrorism alone, without due process and proof, is enough to exclude persons from the category of humanity" (7). Rendered homo sacer, or "bare life," Abdulrahman Zeitoun is stripped not merely of legal rights but also of subjectivity. While Zeitoun shares much with the other dispossessed figures in the bus depot mural, then, as an Arab/Muslim his criminalization has a particular valence: it poses an existential threat to western civilization.

The perilousness of American asylum, and the ease with which citizens such as Zeitoun can slip out of such subjectivity, is also evident in 'Jesus Out to Sea.' The unnamed narrator in Burke's short story remembers Vietnam evacuations while watching Coast Guard helicopters rescue stranded flood refugees, and concludes, "You can't get everybody home" (224). The narrator's assertion here implies that "home" is the zone of safety: to get home is to get to refuge. Significantly, 'home' is conflated with America in

¹³⁴ Samuel P. Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations and the Re-Making of the World Order* (1996) articulates this approach.

¹³⁵ Edward Said's influential *Orientalism* (1978) traces this racialized iconography.

¹³⁶ In *Backlash 9/11*, Bakalian and Bozorgmehr recount post-9/11 incidents of discrimination against Arab/Muslims in America, noting particularly the 'crime' of "flying while Muslim" (141).

this excerpt. To be in danger, for the unnamed narrator, is to be in Vietnam. To be safe and sheltered, meanwhile, is to be in America. To 'get home' is to leave the war zone of Southeast Asia for the safety of the soldiers' homeland. The irony, of course, is that in 'Jesus Out to Sea' the stranded men *are* at home: they're not in Vietnam, but in their hometown of New Orleans, and indeed in -- or on -- the narrator's own house. Home is precisely the hazard here. In Burke's short story, home is the place of greatest peril. As in *Zeitoun's* Camp Greyhound mural, America here is not refuge extant, but hazard personified.

Notably, this doubleness is not a contradiction. It does not negate the narrative of America as asylum extant; the Camp Greyhound mural does not annihilate asylum as shelter. Instead, the relationship between the two is much more nuanced. Asylum is both hazard and shelter -- and inevitably so. Protective refuge is built on the act of exclusion. Shelter only exists because of hazard: and to remain sanctuary, it must exclude. This is evident in the national mythology of America as asylum extant. For every immigrant narrative that recounts the first heart-pounding glimpse of the Statue of Liberty, many other would-be Americans never pass through this gateway to the New World. Ellis Island, after all, existed not as a welcoming stage to America, but precisely in order to cull potential citizens. Refuge is only possible precisely because it is exclusive. Without differentiation from the outside world, the bordered zone of asylum is meaningless. Exclusion thus structures sanctuary; the asylee is also the exile. The mural in *Zeitoun* represents this shadow side of asylum. Exclusion is as innate to refuge as is shelter. Abdulrahman the prisoner reads the fresco as a narrative not of American progress and aspiration, but one of dispossession and peril. Rebel soldiers march off to a battle to protect the South and its peculiar institution; the Ku Klux Klan dresses in sheets to protect America and keep its bloodlines pure. Each act of refuge, of drawing a circle around a space of sanctuary, endangers those who are excluded. Indeed, excluding peril is the definitive act of sanctuary. The Camp Greyhound mural is thus revealing, but in an unexpected way. It sees the grand mythic narrative of America as asylum extant not as a lie, but as only half the story. The history of sanctuary is always also the history of peril, as the mural in *Zeitoun* makes manifest. Not simply a Katrina narrative, Eggers' text here

lays claim to a larger story, and asserts that the history of American asylum is one of hazard and sanctuary paired.

Thus the revelation of asylum as a zone of hazard as well as shelter is not a reversal but a logical extension. For the asylee's shadow is the would-be citizen who is exiled from Ellis Island, rather than welcomed to the New World. Significantly, this revelation of peril is not a reversal of refuge. It does not vacate asylum's promises but rather reveals that sanctuary is predicated on exclusion. And significantly, nationality is the basis for inclusion in asylum. In *Zeitoun*, as in Spike Lee's *When the Levees Broke*, nationality is the conceptual guarantor of refuge. In Lee's film, participants resist the description of Katrina victims stranded at the Superdome, Convention Center and on expressways as 'refugees.' Graham B. Banks, a New Orleans resident and Director of Security at the Superdome Hyatt Hotel, puts it this way: "Damn, when the storm came in that blew away our citizenship, too? What, we forgot, we wasn't American citizens anymore?...Refugees. I thought that was folks that didn't have a country, man, that didn't have anywhere." Here Banks explicitly differentiates the citizen from the refugee, insisting that the two are indisputably different categories. To be an American, he argues, is to 'have somewhere,' and no storm can alter this status. This resolute objection to the use of 'refugees' is hardly surprising; as Anna Hartnell notes, there is "little social advantage in identifying with 'refugees' in a world which brutally punishes statelessness" (24). On 2 September 2005, Reverend Al Sharpton echoed Banks' resistance, insisting in a press conference that citizens cannot be refugees: "We are calling on the media to stop calling them refugees. These are American citizens that in most cases were very viable taxpayers...and the connotation of refugees is like they are some others from somewhere lost needing charity" (Lee). Sharpton frames the argument in monetary terms here, alluding to the fact that refugees are an economic category as much as a political one. For both Banks and Sharpton, however, the point is clear: citizenship is not something you can fall out of. It is permanent, definitive and inherent. In *Homo Sacer: The Sovereign Power of Bare Life*, theorist Giorgio Agamben asserts that the New Orleanian becomes a refugee because the citizen has converted into "bare life." Stripped not only of rights but also of signification, the subject is no longer. The former citizen now cannot even be sacrificed, for its life is meaningless. In the terms established in *When the Levees*

Broke, the citizen has become a refugee. And it is this process which Sharpton and Banks protest in Spike Lee's documentary. Asylum here is secured by national identity; to be an American is to be definitively not a refugee -- and therefore to be sheltered. The Camp Greyhound mural makes the same link between country and refuge. The fresco depicts not only the particular history of Louisiana, but also "the entire history of...the United States in general" (213). The mural tells the story of America, and it represents American history not as a narrative of progress and aspiration, but as one of violence and hazard. America, asylum extant, is itself a zone of hazard, for nationalism -- the theoretical ground of refuge -- is conceptually violent. The definition of an outside inherent to national identity is itself an act of exclusion, and the consequences of this model are evident in Hurricane Katrina.

Asylum's perilousness is particularly evident in one of the most controversial episodes of Hurricane Katrina's disastrous aftermath. When the storm made landfall in Louisiana on Monday, August 29, thousands of New Orleanians had already taken refuge in the Superdome. Designated by the city as a 'refuge of last resort,' the arena was chosen for its high ground and large capacity. But preparations to feed and house the approximately 40,000 people who eventually sought sanctuary in the Superdome were acutely inadequate. After days of no electricity, air conditioning or functioning sewage system, no police presence to maintain order, insufficient medical aid and not enough food or water, the buses promised to evacuate the Superdome refugees still had not arrived. On Wednesday and Thursday, promised once more that transport was on the way, some refugees began to walk out, hoping to meet the promised buses, or to hike out of the city to safe ground. They walked the only dry route away from the arena: towards the Crescent City Connection, twin bridges linking New Orleans to the suburb of Gretna, which had suffered much less storm damage than the city itself. In the days following Katrina, more than 6,000 evacuees tried to cross the Crescent City Connection (Brinkley 469). But Gretna's Mayor Ronnie Harris ordered that no one from New Orleans be allowed in; indeed, Gretna's municipality unofficially declared Jefferson Parish 'Jeffersonia,' and asserted that no New Orleanians be permitted entry (Lee). On Thursday, three days after Katrina, a group of about 200 evacuees walked from the Superdome to the Crescent City Connection. The group included guests of downtown

hotels -- which had just closed their doors due to lack of basic resources -- who had been turned away from both the Superdome and the Convention Center. Advised by an official to hike across the bridge to Gretna, the evacuees made the less than two mile walk from the Superdome to the Crescent City Connection. They were met at the bridge by armed Gretna police officers, who turned them back, declaring "there would be no Superdomes in their city" (Brinkley 469). The evacuees set up an encampment on the bridge, planning to try again the next day. However, as historian Douglas Brinkley recounts, asylum's borders were vigorously defended: "The Gretna police came back at the group in force. 'Get the fuck off the bridge,' the police shouted. When the people didn't respond immediately, the officers pointed their weapons. Ultimately the Gretna police called in a helicopter...its rotor blades blowing the makeshift shelters away...The group retreated to New Orleans" (470).

Gretna police and municipal officials claim that the city was unable to support thousands of extra refugees, as Gretna itself was suffering from limited water and electricity. As well, a local shopping mall had been burned and looted on Thursday afternoon, and police were certain the perpetrators were New Orleanian evacuees who had walked across the bridge. When asked by a news reporter what they were doing on the bridge, one police officer gestured at the evacuees and replied, "We just want to keep them fucks out of here" (Brinkley 471). One month after Katrina, Gretna Police Chief Arthur Lawson commented on the Crescent City Connection blockade: "If you are in your house and they're rioting all around to get in, are you going to let them in?...We saved our city and protected our people" (Witt).

In the Gretna incident, the doubled nature of asylum is bleakly evident: the protection of some is ensured by the exclusion of others. As Police Chief Lawson notes, this act of exclusion is also an act of salvation -- it "saved our city." Simultaneously, of course, it doomed others to the increasingly lethal landscape of post-Katrina New Orleans. And, as in *Zeitoun's* Camp Greyhound mural, asylum's innate exclusion is a violation of citizenship. Indeed, commentators recognized this act of policing refuge's borders as explicitly nationalistic. Karen Carter, a Louisiana State Representative for New Orleans, commented on the Gretna incident in *When the Levees Broke*: "I thought

that I lived in America until shortly after Katrina and the Crescent City Connection was blocked off from people being able to walk freely on United States soil...It was unjust. It was inhumane." Here Carter invokes the imaginary instantiation of asylum, in which refuge is expanded beyond discrete borders to encompass the nation entire. America is asylum extant in this now familiar configuration. To be American is supposed to ensure access to sanctuary, and the right to tread freely on free "United States soil." The failure of this model -- of citizenship as a guarantor of refuge -- is evident in many Katrina texts. *When the Levees Broke* and *Zeitoun* both reveal the conceptual violence at the heart of asylum, and the actual violence made manifest in Gretna and in Camp Greyhound.

The Persistence of Sheltering Asylum

This city won't ever die...
Gentilly to the Vieux Carre
Lower Nine, Central City, Uptown
Singin' Jacamo fee-nah-nay...

This city won't wash away
This city won't ever drown
Blood in the water and hell to pay
Sky tear open and pain rain down
Doesn't matter 'cause come what may
I ain't ever gonna leave this town
--'This City,' Steve Earle

In light of Gretna's act of exclusion, it is important to recall that refuge is not represented solely as hazardous in Katrina texts. *Zeitoun*, for instance, does not close with a meditation on the hazards of sanctuary. That is, Abdulrahman's experiences at Camp Greyhound do not result in an abandonment of the notion of asylum as shelter. Instead, the text ends with a reinvestment in the imaginary instantiation of refuge. Tom Piazza's novel *City of Refuge* closes with a similar gesture towards the enduring possibility of material sanctuary. This familiar characteristic of asylum, discussed in earlier chapters, is also apparent in *The Grapes of Wrath*. In another connection between Hurricane Katrina and the earlier disaster of the Dust Bowl, Tom Piazza says of *City of Refuge* that "the

closest [literary model] for the book as a whole was probably *The Grapes of Wrath*" ('Interview' 10). Although the Joad family cannot stay in Weedpatch, it is only after their sojourn in the government camp that Tom Joad can dream his dream of imaginary asylum. The experience of material refuge -- hazardous or sheltering, successful or failed -- typically facilitates a reinvestment in the imaginary instantiation of sanctuary. That is, the dream of sheltering refuge expands despite the failed reality of asylum. This is not to suggest that the conclusions of *Zeitoun* or *City of Refuge* are recuperative: they don't renege on the revelation of asylum as hazardous. Camp Greyhound endures, and its meaning is not elided here. But one does not extinguish the other, and these texts depict refuge as both perilous *and* sheltering.

Tom Piazza's novel *City of Refuge* tells the story of two New Orleans families through the storm and its aftermath. Several months after Katrina, accomplished carpenter and storm survivor SJ visits his flood-ravaged home in the Lower Ninth Ward with his nephew Wesley. They're back in New Orleans looking for a place to bury Lucy - SJ's sister and Wesley's mother - who died of a heart attack brought on by the stress and loss of Katrina. Standing in front of his devastated home, SJ notices a single piece of fascia board amidst the ruins, hanging askew over the front porch:

He could fix that at least...The fascia board lifted easily into position...This was how you built something, he thought, as he had many times before. One step at a time...Maybe especially among the ruins. There was wood all around; he would build his house back from pieces of the wreckage. And on every piece of wood he would write the name of someone from the Nine...As long as he had something to build, he thought, and a place to start.

SJ dug two nails out of his pocket and set them between his teeth. Then he looked down at Wesley. 'It's straight?' he said.

Wesley nodded.

'Good,' SJ said. 'Hand me that hammer.' (401, 403)

Rebuilding is a trope of the disaster narrative. In its most ecstatic form, the genre depicts catastrophe as re-birth: the phoenix rises from the ashes of its own annihilation.¹³⁷ Piazza's novel invokes this convention, in explicitly material form. In the text's conclusion, SJ rebuilds his own home, his Ninth Ward neighbourhood and by extension New Orleans. This act of recreation is literally made of disaster. It is not that SJ rebuilds despite the storm; rather, by "build[ing] his house back from pieces of the wreckage," he fashions refuge out of devastation. In *City of Refuge*, the detritus of Hurricane Katrina repairs home -- that most primal instantiation of sanctuary. SJ's devastated house literalizes refuge here. In these concluding lines, wreckage is made sanctuary, in an evocative example of a return to embodied asylum. Despite the ravages of Katrina, and the hurricane's devastation of material refuge, this image of material refuge, the possibility that asylum endures in the concrete register is not abandoned here. Piazza's novel closes with a re-inscription of refuge, expressed in the discourse of catastrophic renewal.

A remarkably similar scene closes Dave Eggers' *Zeitoun*. In the text's concluding paragraphs, surrounded by post-Katrina devastation, Abdulrahman Zeitoun dreams a dream of expansionist refuge. In this vision, asylum is configured not just as personal salvation, and not even as New Orleans' deliverance from Hurricane Katrina, but as America entire:

As he drives through the city during the day and dreams of it at night, his mind vaults into glorious reveries -- he envisions this city and this country not just as it was, but better, far better. It can be. Yes, a dark time passed over this land, but now there is something like light. Progress is being made...We have removed the rot, we are strengthening the foundations....So let us get up early and stay late, and, brick by brick and block by block, let us get that work done.
(325)

¹³⁷ This trope of rebuilding, of destruction as wiping the slate clean and facilitating a new start, is reflected in other texts as well. In the immediate aftermath of Katrina, Richard H. Baker, a 10-term Republican from Baton Rouge, said "We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn't do it, but God did" (Babington).

In its scope, Zeitoun's concluding vision recalls the Camp Greyhound mural. For both the fresco and the vision depict not just personal salvation but an American imaginary. For Abdulrahman, refuge is more than a boat. He envisions "this city and this country" in an expansionist dream of asylum here, and in doing so, implicitly calls for a nation of refuge. But while the depot-prison fresco is similarly expansive in scope, in this passage Zeitoun dreams of the nation as sanctuary, and not as hazard. And notably, this vision of perfected refuge does not abandon the material instantiation of asylum. Not simply a literal dream of mythic sanctuary, here Zeitoun's vision exists in wakefulness as well as slumber. He envisions a perfected New Orleans as he drives through the city while awake *and* dreams of it while asleep. In both states, Zeitoun's mind "vaults into glorious reveries." This language of fantasy describes both Zeitoun's conscious and unconscious visions of a perfected New Orleans. This conceptual conflation suggests that material and imaginary refuge are of a piece. The different registers of refuge are not wholly differentiated here. Unlike 'Jesus Out to Sea,' in *Zeitoun* sanctuary is neither the stuff of pure fantasy nor relegated to a literal dreamworld.

Although *Zeitoun's* final reverie is less measured than the concluding lines of *City of Refuge*, it is nonetheless striking that both texts feature builders and close with images of literal re-building -- of foundations and bricks and fascia. Material refuge also serves as a metaphor in Eggers' closing paragraphs, when he recounts the task of rebuilding "brick by brick and block by block." Abdulrahman Zeitoun is, after all, a builder: as a contractor, he repairs and maintains, paints and restores homes all over New Orleans. So the metaphorical work of rebuilding the Crescent City is not only figurative for Eggers' protagonist, and in this section of *Zeitoun*, labour produces refuge. Eggers' text refutes the notion that asylum is inherently, inevitably flawed. Here, *Zeitoun* suggests, refuge can be renovated. Restoration is possible. In this vision of asylum, effort and will construct an American sanctuary. With hard work strengthening the foundations and removing the rot, the nation of refuge can be perfected.

A similar impulse is evident in Spike Lee's *When the Levees Broke*. The documentary's epigraph declares, "Today, the people living along the Gulf Coast continue their daily struggle to rebuild, revive, and renew in these United States of America." This

dedication appears at the beginning of the film, effectively framing the documentary in the discourse of renewal. As Anna Hartnell notes, "*Levees* foregrounds not deconstruction, but rather reconstruction" (30). Whatever gruesome images of failed refuge may follow -- and they do -- this opening gesture establishes a conceptual framework for Lee's entire film. The dedication instructs the viewer from the film's first moments that this is ultimately a story of renewal. Notably, in doing so the epigraph does not wholly elide suffering. Lee tells us that Gulf Coasters "continue their daily struggle" for redemption. Catastrophe is not fully converted into renewal here, as the dailiness of exertion insists. But the chronological knowingness of the epigraph -- its backward glance from the privileged position of after Katrina -- assures the viewer that disaster survivors continue to "rebuild, revive, and renew." This is precisely the rhetoric of reinvestment. In these opening and closing moments, *City of Refuge*, *Zeitoun* and *When the Levees Broke* all seek not to, as Hartnell puts it, "discard, but rather renew the discourse of American exceptionalism by closing the gap between the ideal and the real" (30). This gap between the idea and the reality of America maps precisely onto the disparity between the imaginary and material registers of asylum. In moments of disaster, refuge is the mode by which the nation's success or failure is calibrated. And in the texts of Hurricane Katrina, this zone of exception articulates both the national narrative of enduring asylum, and the utter evacuation of shelter in a drowning city.

Concluding Notes:

New Arks in an Age of Disaster

Let's put our heads together and start a new country up
Up underneath the river bed we'll burn the river down...
This land is the land of ours, this river runs red over it...

This is where they walked, swam
Hunted, danced and sang
Take a picture here
Take a souvenir

Cuyahoga
Cuyahoga, gone

--'Cuyahoga,' R.E.M.

In *Noah* (2014), director Darren Aronofsky revises the West's ur-disaster narrative for an age of environmental catastrophe. In the movie's final scene, God's rainbow covenant re-imposes order on a ravaged world, and, at a climactic moment, Noah's daughter-in-law asks him fearfully, "Is this the end of everything?" Played by Russell Crowe, the flood hero replies, "The beginning. The beginning of everything." Here the narrative of catastrophic renewal asserts that cataclysm is not finitude but commencement. Re-birth is a trope not only of the disaster narrative, but also of American mythology, and Aronofsky's film gestures towards a new model for this familiar pattern. Scholars have long identified the American Adam as an archetype of the nation's continual re-invention. However, like "Old Man" and "The Man Who Saw the Flood," *Noah* depicts not the first man but the flood hero as the paradigm for re-birth. Indeed, the texts themselves suggest this reading, as they represent Noah as a direct successor of Adam. In Aronofsky's film, a montage of the flood's pre-history begins with Adam and Eve exiled from Eden. In doing so, the film identifies the Great Deluge as the second chapter of the Eden story -- a literary lineage echoed in James Weldon Johnson's "Noah Built the Ark." Johnson's poem begins with Eden, but ends with the flood. The opening lines of "Noah Built the Ark" find Yahweh walking through the Garden "in the cool of the day," while in the

closing verse God declares, "Next time I'll rain down fire" (160, 165). This textual connection between the Genesis stories of creation and re-creation echoes the notion that "Noah is a second Adam, the father of the new human race" ("Noah," Eerdmans 44). While America is conventionally figured as a New Eden, the post-flood Mount Ararat is also a compelling exemplar, and one which would benefit from further study.

To return to Aronofsky's film, *Noah* controversially revises its scriptural source material. For the film imagines the Great Deluge as a climatological disaster. In the montage of the flood's pre-history, after Adam and Eve are exiled from Eden, modern cities rise and fall, and the earth is rendered barren. Even before the flood drowns the earth, the film's landscape looks post-apocalyptic. In Aronofsky's vision, then, the pre-diluvian world is already afflicted by disaster. *Noah* is set, as film critic David Denby notes, in an era that is both historical and futuristic: "Advanced man has polluted the earth, yet somehow we are still in Biblical times" (74). This temporal dissonance suggests that the Great Deluge destroys humanity for environmental sins as much as moral corruption. *Noah*'s slippage between natural disaster and ecological destruction exemplifies a gap in both popular and scholarly histories of the contemporary environmental crisis. Natural disasters such as Hurricane Sandy are increasingly understood not as discrete acts of God but as confirmation of a perpetual, global ecocatastrophe. While this climatological disaster is unprecedented in scientific terms, it is not without literary models. As *Noah* indicates -- and as we have seen in this project -- contemporary accounts of catastrophe are not *sui generis* but are instead informed by historical disaster narratives. Further investigation of this literary heritage could produce a discursive framework within which to situate the emerging canon of eco-crisis narratives.

Just as the disaster narrative is both invoked and revised in Aronofsky's film, so too does *Noah* both re-inscribe and subvert asylum. While the ark does save Noah and his family from the flood, it's no uncomplicated refuge. Evil stows away on the floating sanctuary in the person of Tubal-Cain, and in a radical re-visioning of the scriptural source material, Noah's son Shem and his wife actually try to escape the ark. The couple build a raft in an attempt to flee Noah and his plan to kill their infant child. Thus in

Aronofsky's film, sanctuary from one murderous father merely constitutes exposure to another. Asylum here is prison as much as refuge. As we have seen, the American mythology of the republic as asylum extant, and refugees as definitively other, elides the nuanced way in which sanctuary functions in American literature. This project's analysis of refuge intervenes in contemporary debates about vulnerable citizenship -- about how an ark or a nation becomes a prison. Thus it contextualizes, for instance, the depiction of so-called 'climate refugees' in the long and complex history of American sanctuary.

Darren Aronofsky's re-visioning of the ur-disaster narrative is only one example of the genre's lasting relevance. Historical disaster narratives continue to form a compelling archive in the wake of new catastrophes. After Hurricane Sandy devastated the East Coast in autumn 2012, Brooklyn's Mason Jar Music recorded a fundraising album comprised of covers of earlier flood songs. The collection features the 1927 Great Mississippi Flood tunes 'Backwater Blues,' 'Mississippi Heavy Water Blues,' and 'When the Levee Breaks' -- the latter of which also inspired the title of Spike Lee's Hurricane Katrina documentary *When the Levees Broke*. In addition to familiar genres such as the blues, new modes of disaster narratives are also emerging. The 2013 collection *#Sandy* documents the hurricane through photographs by well-known artists -- but taken only on iPhones. And at the January 2014 Australian arts fair Sydney Festival, musician Lee Ranaldo -- formerly of Sonic Youth -- performed his composition *Hurricane Variations*. The piece includes ambient sound of the storm itself which he recorded while standing in the middle of a Manhattan street during Hurricane Sandy. The endurance of existing forms of disaster narratives paired with recent innovations indicates the vitality of the genre. Yet disaster narratives remain largely unexplored by literary critics. In particular, accounts of natural catastrophes have not been attended to as a discrete archive. As disaster studies gains traction as a field of inquiry, close attention to accounts of natural disaster could illuminate how the genre constructs catastrophe as well as describes it. Such analysis could consider, for instance, whether there is a catastrophic aesthetic. While the work of this project has been to investigate the mythology of asylum in moments of storm, flood and drought, the rhetoric of disaster remains an intriguing and uncharted field of inquiry. **Indeed, the rising waters, worsening storms and swelling population of refugees which characterize contemporary life call for engaged**

scholarly investigation of both the disaster narrative and sanctuary/ and the literary genre which tells its stories

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