

# Prisons and Floods in the United States

## Interrogating Notions of Social and Spatial Control

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On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina ripped across Southern Louisiana, rupturing New Orleans' levees and scouring a place for itself among the costliest and most poorly managed disasters in contemporary history. On that fateful August morning, an inmate at the Orleans Parish Prison recalled, "we awake to find water up to our knees and no security."<sup>1</sup> The water would eventually rise to the inmates' necks. As another inmate recounted, "it was like we were left to die. No water, no air, no food."<sup>2</sup> As the wealthy and the free fled the city, inmates in local prisons—whose impregnable walls held firm while the once-impregnable levees crumbled—were left locked in their cells. Hurricane Katrina brutally illustrated the conflict between the apparent order of prisons and the chaos of floods, revealing the differentiated value of life placed on incarcerated individuals and troubling notions of maximum security or absolute protection. Yet while Hurricane Katrina provided a particularly stark example of the violent convergence of criminal and flood controls, Katrina was not a unique event. These two structures of social and spatial control cooperated and clashed throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, leaving behind an obscured, complex historical record that demands greater scholarly attention.

At first glance, systems of levees and systems of prisons appear unrelated. The former focuses on rivers and flood control. The latter focuses on social norms and controlling illicit human behavior. Yet the vocabularies used to debate flood prevention and criminal justice techniques closely parallel one another. Furthermore, the two systems have physically intersected with a perverse frequency, as the state consistently builds prisons on vulnerable floodplains. Though the state has always been and continues to be willing to place incarcerated bodies in areas with a high risk of flooding and thus physical danger, the design and function of a prison's architecture conceals the potential chaos implied—and historically speaking, frequently realized—by a prison's proximity to floodwaters.

Much like imposing, federally-backed levee systems, prisons project an "architecture of control" that reflects

the state dream of full social order, both inside and outside of the prison. Strict protocols, concrete beds, steel-barred windows and pacing guards imply that this dream has, in fact, been realized. Yet floods, amongst other natural disasters, provide an avenue for chaos to move through the seemingly indestructible barriers of the prison. Throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, floods have threatened or necessitated emergency evacuations of prisons, as well as the movement of inmates out of prisons to work on flood protection and rescue. Only by examining both the theoretical parallels and the historical convergences between these two systems of control can we uncover their surprisingly intimate relationship. Recovered narratives from flooded prisons, wherein the uncontrollable met the impenetrable, thus provide a historical nexus for the critical deconstruction of state ambitions for complete social and spatial control.

Theories of social and environmental control envision total mastery over subversion and lawlessness, over crime and catastrophe. When put into practice, these hubristic theories carry racist implications and often reinforce the other's oppressive effects. The first section of this paper briefly analyzes the discursive parallels between these two forms of control and the lived effects of these similarities. The second section of this paper spatially situates these consequences through a discussion of the historical geography of prisons in the United States. Many of the U.S.'s largest prisons lie alongside rivers, tucked riskily into the vast floodplains of the Mississippi River or coastal waterways. For many of these prisons, their locations are a vestigial remnant of the prisons' former days as farms and plantations. For a shrinking but significant number, such as Louisiana's Angola Penitentiary or Mississippi's Parchman Farms, this history lives in the day-to-day motions of inmates' involuntary agricultural labor. Even for prisons with no history of agricultural production, the state still undervalued incarcerated bodies and correspondingly deemphasized flood risks when selecting prison locations. Conditions of environmental catastrophe like flooding exposed the way American social structures value lives on a differentiated scale, with incarcerated lives situated at the lowest point both literally and figuratively. The third and longest section of this paper further historicizes the relationship between prisons, prisoners and floods, putting a diverse array of historical voices into conversation. This

1 Inmate #13, "Testimonials from Inmates Incarcerated at Orleans Parish Prison during Hurricane Katrina," American Civil Liberties Union, ACLU.org, n.d..

2 Inmate #19, Ibid.

historical discussion, combined with broader theoretical and linguistic juxtapositions, reveals the fragility concealed and even created by the projected stability of these twin systems and their quests for perfect control.

### Theory and Praxis of State Control: Parallel Discourses on Prisons and Floods

Social theorists and scholars who study social and environmental control ponder interchangeable questions: they ask how a state bends unruly forces to its will and the costs of attaining these ambitions. Social control critics must address spatial control through their discussions of architecture, landscape and the built environment, while scholars of environmental control invariably highlight the social goals of any environmental improvement or management scheme. In turn, public policymakers and practitioners—the engineers of these state systems of control—approach prison and flood engineering with the same mindsets and techniques. But these two nodes of organization, whether discussed in the theoretical or the imminent, do not simply run in fascinating parallel, but rather intersect via instances of flooded or almost-flooded prisons. This section seeks to properly situate these historical intersections by exploring the illustrative parallels between social and environmental control theory and practice.

Social theorists studying prisons may not explicitly incorporate theories of environmental control into their work, but their language reflects the inherent spatiality of incarceration. Angela Davis historicizes the American prison system by emphasizing the transition from “the prison of slavery to the slavery of prison.”<sup>3</sup> Whether this historicism is correct is a question that engages many other contemporary scholars, including Michelle Alexander and James Forman Jr.<sup>4</sup> Despite their debates, these academics recognize that this

historical transformation has not been solely legal or cultural but also spatial and environmental; incarceration molds the geography of black communities (and often renders them more vulnerable to flooding) while the power relations of slavery are re-inscribed into the cell blocks and guard towers of American prisons.

French social theorist Michel Foucault’s work complicates the American history of racial injustice that engages many contemporary scholars. Alexander and Davis focus on the prison’s spatial relationship to the outside world—to the landscape, to the alluvial plantation-quality soils, to broader racial geographies of education and housing—and thus they conclude that the prison is a uniquely American historical product. Foucault, on the other hand, emphasizes the self-contained spatial relationships within the prison—that of the guard to the inmate or the inmates to each other. In doing so, he concludes that the prison is philosophical, rather than only historical, born of Jeremy Bentham and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. His spatial analysis of criminal control is more abstract, and it focuses on the prison’s interior structure.<sup>5</sup> He writes that “he who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power [...] he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles.”<sup>6</sup> This renders the incarcerated subject able to be “subjected, used, transformed and improved.”<sup>7</sup> In *The Prison and the American Imagination*, Caleb Smith summarizes the fundamental tension that results from an inward or outward conception of prisons, asking “does the contemporary prison descend from the plantation, or from the [Enlightenment’s] penitentiary?”<sup>8</sup> Yet in spite of these etiological conflicts, theorists all emphasize the spatiality of the architecture of control. In deconstructing the form of social control expressed in prisons, scholars reckon with, either indirectly or directly, questions of environmental control through their confrontation of physicality and spatiality.

Conversely, scholars who focus on historical and contemporary schemes of environmental control take care to highlight the subtler motives of social control that undergird these state projects. Edward Abbey’s bold claim that “the

3 Angela Y. Davis Reader, ed. by Joy James (Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 74. See also: Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), 27.

4 Alexander argues that harsh contemporary drug sentencing policy has disproportionately targeted Black men and has recreated a de facto system of ostracization, cyclical poverty and imprisonment that early to mid 20th century Jim Crow laws once aimed to achieve. James Forman pushes back against what he sees as Alexander’s simplistic one-to-one connection between Jim Crow laws and modern mass incarceration, highlighting the complexities of violent offenders, class distinctions, white victims of mass incarceration and opinions towards law enforcement within the African American community. See Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, (New York: New Press, 2012).; James Forman, Jr., “Racial Critiques of Mass Incarceration: Beyond the New Jim Crow,” (2012), Faculty Scholarship Series. Paper 3599.

5 As Roger Pol-Droit aptly summarized in an interview with Foucault, in Foucault’s analysis, the “prison means a rigorous regulation of space, because the guard can and must see everything.” See Roger-Pol Droit, “Michel Foucault, on the Role of Prisons,” *New York Times*, August 5, 1975.

6 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, 1995), 201-202.

7 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 136.

8 Smith, Caleb, *The Prison and the American Imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009, 143.

domination of nature leads to the domination of human nature” proves itself to be true in state-sanctioned flood control projects overlaid onto inhabited, messy landscapes.<sup>9</sup> Usually, this “domination of human nature” consists of the subordination of one people’s worldview to another’s. In his work on the Nazi obsession with German race and German land that motivated the draining of Eastern swamps and the Holocaust, David Blackbourn cautions that “what we call landscapes are neither natural nor innocent; they are human constructs.”<sup>10</sup> In interwar Germany, visions of improving land could not be separated from improving people. Similarly, quests to drain swamps in the United States came with rhetorical hints of a civilizing mission, as well as explicit ambitions of making swamps productive and profitable.<sup>11</sup> In his book *Rising Tide*, John Barry details how political and cultural hegemon LeRoy Percy fought to have levees built throughout the Mississippi Delta, containing the river and rendering its floodplains immensely profitable.<sup>12</sup> Percy, like others who acquired incredible wealth and political clout, did so both through the mechanisms of environmental control and on the backs of human labor. Projects of environmental and criminal control share a common worldview that has “subjected, used, transformed and improved” individual bodies and common landscapes, or at least has aimed to do so.

These ideological similarities continue to manifest themselves in theory and practice. Civil engineers and prison architects mull over many of the same concerns as they design their parallel structures of control: how to keep ostensibly unruly forces restrained within their assigned boundaries; how to monitor these forces; how to safeguard against the unexpected. Civil engineers have spent decades debating the merits of various flood control techniques, most notably along the Mississippi River: would outlets and reservoirs provide a necessary release for the chaos of the Mississippi’s flood stage? Or would levees-only containment force the river to scour its own bed, digging itself deeper into the course that men had set for it?<sup>13</sup> Engineers bet their reputations on which method

would prove most effective to “control [a river] in space and arrest it in time.”<sup>14</sup> Prison designers ask similar questions: how can one render inmates constantly visible and traceable? How can one incentivize inmates to keep order amongst themselves? Akin to flood planning theory that rests on self-scouring, the answer to the latter question sets inmates against themselves: threats of solitary confinement or transfers to Supermax facilities combined with opportunities for parole incentivize docility and self-discipline.<sup>15</sup> Just as the 1927 Mississippi flood proved the self-scouring theory disastrously misguided, spiking mental health crises and recidivism rates illustrate the dangers of control tactics that manipulate the psychology of the incarcerated subject.<sup>16</sup> To balance this rigidity—analogue to the environmental engineer’s outlet-based flood control planning—prisons provide circumscribed avenues for frustration and desire: artistic expression, Bible study, exercise. Outlet-based approaches carry illusions of freedom, while self-scouring and carrot-stick policies abandon such pretensions. Both philosophies of governance rely on making the subject of the policy, whether defiantly human or inexorably inanimate, less powerful and more predictable. These rhetorical and practical commonalities, as well as the rich history of lived intersections between floods and prisons, compel these parallel subjects to be brought into an explicit theoretical and historical conversation.

### Locations: The Geography of American Prisons

Why are so many American prisons and jails placed in locations vulnerable to flooding? One tempting theory, more historical than contemporary, is that water creates isolation more effectively than any manmade structure or invention. This hypothesis posits that a desire to secure prison borders against escape would induce designers to place inmates on islands, locations at greater risk of floods.<sup>17</sup> Yet these island prisons have

9 Edward Abbey, *Beyond the Wall: Essays from the Outside*, (New York: Henry, Holt & Co, 1984), 44.

10 David Blackbourn, *The Conquest of Nature: Water, Landscape and the Making of Modern Germany*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 15.

11 Richard Grant, “Deep in the Swamps, Archaeologists Are Finding How Fugitive Slaves Kept Their Freedom,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, September 2016.; Anthony Wilson, *Shadow and Shelter: The Swamp in Southern Culture*, (U. Press of Mississippi, 2005).

12 Barry, *Rising Tide*, 93-169.

13 John Barry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997).

14 John McPhee, “Atchafalaya,” *The New Yorker*, Feb. 23, 1987.

15 Mark Binelli, “Inside America’s Toughest Federal Prison,” *The New York Times*, March 26, 2015.

16 *Ibid.*

17 Indeed, island prisons were some of the most secure. Prisoners at Puget Sound’s McNeill Island, the “prison without walls,” played baseball with the guards’ kids and mowed their lawns. In the prison’s 130 years of operation, less than two dozen prisoners successfully escaped. Despite this relative impregnability, the impracticality of staffing and supplying such an isolated prison led to the facility’s closure in 2011. Rob Carson, “Some McNeil Islanders Tried to Escape; Most Didn’t Succeed,” *The Bellingham Herald*, March 28, 2011.; Patrick Oppman, “Last Island Prison in U.S. Closes,” *CNN.com*, April 1, 2011.) High costs also shuttered Alcatraz, the infamous prison in the San Francisco Bay that housed Al Capone, back in 1963. (Mark Binelli, “Inside America’s Toughest Federal Prison.”) Rikers Island is one of the last U.S. island prisons still

rarely, if ever, experienced dangerously high flooding.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, the placement of prisons along volatile riverbanks has caused dozens of prisons to almost or actually flood. I contend that the state approves of and constructs prisons significantly closer to dangerous floodplains than it does for other forms of settlement because the calculus of risk and profit shifts dramatically to privilege profit in regard to incarcerated bodies. However, most of my analysis of prisons' proximity to rivers is based solely on photography and personal explorations of satellite imagery: neither academic nor popular literature systematically addresses prison locations. Regardless of this lack of precise quantification, a discussion of the two interrelated considerations—risk and profit—that push prisons recklessly close to riverbanks provides a crucial framework for further historical claims.

The first of these twin factors—increased disaster risk due to riparian proximity—reveals the different values placed on incarcerated versus free persons. While many people build houses and businesses on dangerous flood plains, they do so willingly and usually with knowledge about the risks to property and body that they are assuming. Not so with incarcerated individuals, who have no say in the matter. In his article “Geography and Justice: Why Prison Location Matters,” Steven Arrigg Koh corrects the “prison location omission” in legal literature. However, he fails to analyze the breakdown of prison geography. While Koh correctly emphasizes that “where a prisoner serves time often crucially determines how much of a deprivation he or she will suffer” and that “[punishment] inexorably occurs within the confines of a physical space located in a city, state and country,” he never addresses the history and geography of prison locations in the United States.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, the many scholars who have detailed the historical-geographical links between antebellum plantations and modern prisons have yet to quantify this common geographic factor amongst U.S. prisons through either statistical regressions or visual analysis.<sup>20</sup> Questions of proximity and risk

in operation.

- 18 Though they appear to be the most environmentally vulnerable form of captivity, with their threats of exposure to storms, winds and floods, island prisons have rarely flooded. Even Rikers Island, discussed later for its role as a cultural touchstone during Hurricane Sandy, did not actually flood during Sandy or other major hurricanes. (Ed Morales, “How NYC Got Rikers Island and Why It Doesn’t Work,” Citylimits.org, Nov. 24, 2015.)
- 19 Steven Arrigg Koh, “Geography and Justice: Why Prison Location Matters in U.S. and International Theories of Criminal Punishment,” *Vanderbilt Journal of Transnational Law* 46, no. 1 (2013): 1267.
- 20 Eduardo Mendieta, “Plantation, Prison, Ghetto: U.S. Racial Geographies, *Philosophy & Geography* 7, no. 1 (2004): 43-59.; Charles M. Blow, “Plantations, Prisons and Profits,” *New York Times*, May 26, 2012.; Katherine McKittrick,

require more than haphazard or solely speculative analysis, but a systematic quantitative study is beyond the scope of this paper.

Scholars have devoted much more time to the second factor—profit—and the evolving economic incentives and legal schemes that have pushed prisons close to rivers. Over the last century, prisons in the U.S. have followed the same patterns of concentration as the general population (Figure 1).

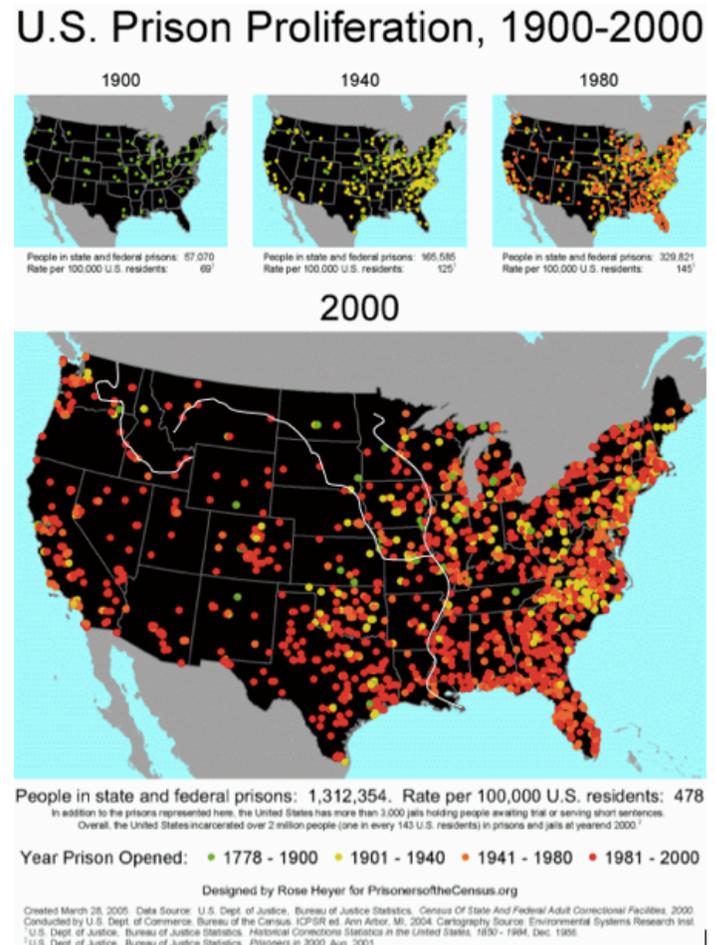


Figure 1. U.S. Prison Proliferation, with added overlays of the Snake, Missouri and Mississippi River. Source: Prisonpolicy.org.

Reflecting the broader patterns of population density, many federal and state prisons are located near rivers.<sup>21</sup> Supply chain

“On Plantations, Prisons, and a Black Sense of Place,” *Social & Cultural Geography* 12, no. 8, (2011): 947.; *Historical Geographies of Prisons: Unlocking the Usable Carceral Past*, ed. By Karen M. Morin and Dominique Moran, (New York: Routledge, 2009).; Dennis Ray Childs, “Formations of Neoslavery: The Cultures and Politics of the American Carceral State,” Order No. 3210537, University of California, Berkeley, 2005.

- 21 Three of the most visually striking correlations, the Mississippi,

concerns comprise part of this profit motive; low costs and ease of planning incentivize the placement of prisons close to civilian populations. Proximity to general populations also smoothens the logistics of transporting inmates to mandated labor and community service roles.

Going beyond mundane logistical concerns, many prisons' profit considerations took root generations ago, before the modern prison mediated the relationship between slavery and agriculture. When Congress outlawed slavery "except as a punishment for crime" after the Civil War, many plantations turned into prison farms, wherein "duly convicted" persons worked agricultural or manufacturing jobs for extremely little or no pay.<sup>22</sup> As Jessica Adams writes in *Wounds of Returning: Race, Memory and Property on the Post-Slavery Plantation*, "the effects of the plantation system on society reemerge as enforced divisions between prisoner and citizen, which reiterate the divisions between free and unfree, master and slave."<sup>23</sup> Revealingly, Mississippi Governor James Vardaman established the Parchman Farm prison only after institutionalized mass convict leasing became socially unacceptable.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, throughout the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Southern governors built prisons specifically to harness labor, turning convict leasing into an in-house business where the fields lay within the prison's fences.<sup>25</sup> While the majority of U.S. state and federal prisons no longer contain an agricultural component, those that do can recoup many of their operating costs—an unusual form of profit, but certainly profit nonetheless. Prison farms have fallen out of favor in the last few decades, due in part to increased farm mechanization, but many still remain, particularly in the South.<sup>26</sup> Even for prisons with no surviving agricultural component, their current locations on rich, low-lying, and thus flood-prone soils often date back to their former purposes.

### History: What Happened When Prisons Flooded?

The historical record of the twentieth century confirms that floods frequently affected prisons, especially those located along the Mississippi River and its tributaries. The rest of this

paper will chronicle a diverse range of historical situations in which floods jeopardized the safety of prisons and prisoners, looking at different narratives from journalists, prison administrators and prisoners themselves. Combating the danger of floods required emergency planning, cessation of everyday procedure, lockdowns and occasionally evacuations. These differing responses to flood threats all aimed to maintain state authority as full spatial control—over cell block order, utilities, entrances—threatened to slip. Most floods did not ultimately produce a loss of state control over the prison or prisoners, but many sparked episodes of violence and chaos that exposed the state's hidden fragility. Flood situations even revealed long-standing weaknesses in the state's "architecture of control," bringing into question whether the state had ever fully known or ordered the carceral space.

As floods barreled closer to the walls of major prisons, many prison administrators fought desperately to avoid evacuations. Evacuations were expensive. They required extensive planning in order to avoid riots or escapes. Any unrest scared the public, and officials privileged the public's safety concerns over prisoners' wellbeing. In 1940, prison officials at a North Carolina prison farm sent prisoners out to reinforce levees along the Roanoke River even as they acknowledged that "if the flood is as bad as expected, the dyke won't have a chance," leaving the prisoners vulnerable to the oncoming floodwaters.<sup>27</sup> In 1993, workers at Illinois' Menard Correctional Center cut a hole through multiple layers of walls and fences, building a new rock road through the excavation just to reach to the inmates.<sup>28</sup> As water streamed into the Center's cells, cutting off supplies of drinking water and electricity, Warden George Wellborne initiated a lockdown rather than risk the chaos of evacuation. But despite administrators' best efforts, evacuations sometimes became unavoidable. In 2007, the sheriff at the Clark County Jail evacuated 45 of the jail's inmates only when flood damage caused "three inches of sewage to float on the floor." (The remaining inmates slept in the chapel while they scrubbed down the jail's floors.)<sup>29</sup> While administrators often successfully avoided evacuations, these occasional last-ditch emergency situations created particularly robust opportunities

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Missouri and Snake Rivers, have been traced onto Figure 1.

22 Transcript of 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: Abolition of Slavery (1865)," Ourdocuments.gov.

23 Jessica Adams, *Wounds of Returning: Race, Memory and Property on the Post-Slavery Plantation*, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press Books, 2007), 146.

24 Caleb Smith, *The Prison and the American Imagination*, (New Haven: Yale UP, 2009), 151.

25 Matthew J. Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another: Convict Leasing in the American South, 1866-1928*, (U. of South Carolina, 1996), 1.

26 Robert Winters, "Evaluating the Effectiveness of Prison Farm Programs," *Corrections.com*, Sept. 23, 2013.

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27 Associated Press, "25 Persons Dead in Flood's Wake," *Augusta Chronicle* (Augusta, Georgia), Aug 16, 1940.

28 "Floods Threaten Illinois Prison," *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, NPR.org, July 24, 1993.

29 John E. Dannenberg, "Prison Drinking Water and Wastewater Pollution Threaten Environmental Safety Nationwide," *Prison Legal News*, Nov. 15, 2007.; In 1983 at the Arizona State Prison at Florence, evacuation occurred only after the Gila River completely flooded the Quonset huts that housed the inmates. See: Arthur H. Rotstein, "Nine Dead or Missing as Floods Devastate Arizona," *The Oregonian* (Portland, Oregon), Oct 3, 1983.

for chaos.

Fearing the confusion of a rushed evacuation, other officials preemptively evacuated prisons to maintain order in flood emergencies. In 2015 the Alabama Department of Corrections evacuated 300 inmates as a “safety precaution,” taking a much more preventative approach to risk management.<sup>30</sup> A National Sheriffs’ Association report held up the 2008 Iowa jail evacuations as a shining example of how long-term flood-evacuation planning enabled an incident-free implementation.<sup>31</sup> The differences in timing and intent of these various evacuations—preventative versus reactionary—demonstrate two state strategies for containing the lack of control implied by impending floods. In some situations, state officials decided to contain prisoners for far too long because they did not have an adequate plan or destination for evacuation. They figured that evacuation would be unnecessary (and they were often right). In other situations, state officials evacuated preemptively, in order to avoid a situation in which evacuation became impossible, dangerous or uncontrollable. The two options were simply different means of reaching the ultimate goal: the maintenance of a situation in which state control was never threatened, even as the physical space of imprisonment very much was.

In these flood emergencies and evacuations, favorable media coverage that focused on officials over inmates concealed instances of state fragility from the public. When the Neuse Correctional Institution evacuated 800 prisoners in October 2016, the majority of news outlets gave the incident only a line or two, with no mention of the conditions inside the prison that spurred the evacuation.<sup>32</sup>

Yet two weeks later, conditions at Neuse forced themselves back into the news; inmates started fires and shattered windows, reportedly protesting their poor treatment during the evacuation and transfer. Again journalists emphasized the administration’s response over prisoners’ reasons for rioting. One article ended with the simple reassurance, “all inmates are contained and the public is safe.”<sup>33</sup> During Hurricane Sandy in 2012, Mayor Michael Bloomberg responded to the public’s concern for Rikers Island inmates, who received no evacuation zone designation, with a gruff reassurance that “the land is up where they are and jails are secured. Don’t worry about anybody getting out.” According to inmates at Rikers during Hurricane Irene, staff put inmates under lock-down to prevent riots and panic over potential flooding, but this treatment did not make it into traditional news coverage.<sup>34</sup> In situations where state control faltered, reactionary lockdowns actually demonstrated the state’s vulnerability and thus the power of individual inmates; hints at this individuality even made it through into some news reports.<sup>35</sup> Generally

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correctional officers” erupted. Yet when asked about the reason for mass evacuation, Major Richard Babcock replied that “we’re just trying to get ahead of [the flood].” (See “Texas Floods Cause Blackout, Mass Evacuations in Prisons,” RT.com, May 29, 2016; Lauren Caruba, “Inmates Riot During Texas flooding that Forces Evacuation,” Houston Chronicle, May 29, 2016.) For Neuse story, see Jon Bacon and Doyle Rice, “Flooded N.C. City: ‘Please Pray for Our Community,’” USA Today, Oct 11, 2016.; “Rising Floodwaters Forces Evacuation of Nearly 800 Inmates from Goldsboro Prison,” Winston-Salem Journal (Winston-Salem, NC), Oct 10, 2016.; Ethan Smith, “Neuse Correctional Institution Evacuated,” The Goldsboro News-Argus (Wayne County, NC), Oct 11, 2016.

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30 Carol Robinson, “336 State Inmates Evacuated After Heavy Rains Threaten Flooding,” AL.com, Dec 26, 2015. In 1964, an Alabama prison camp evacuated 300 prisoners without reported incident. (See United Press International, “1000 Homeless in Flooded South,” The Washington Post, Times Herald, April 9, 1964.)

31 James A. Murphy, “Two Case Studies on Jail Evacuations During a Natural Disaster: Iowa’s 2008 Flooding: Part 2,” Corrections.com, Oct 1, 2012.

32 Indeed, the marginalization of inmates’ concerns often manifests itself as much by what is not said as what is; stories about how floods threaten the safety of incarcerated people are underreported and glossed over. For instance, in Jefferson City in 1993, only the officers travelling in to the prison on boats were mentioned as actors in a brief story on the flooded Algoa Prison. The interior space of the prison remained conceptually empty. (See: Ronald Smothers, “Jefferson City Watches River Defy Forecasts,” New York Times, July 1, 1993.) Similarly, when flooding along the Brazos River in 2016 forced the evacuation of over 2,500 people in Texan prisons, administrators refused to provide information about conditions. One of these Brazos River floods caused a power outage, during which “a massive brawl between inmates and

33 “2 Injured, 2 Fires Set During 4-Hour Riot at Goldsboro Prison,” CBS North Carolina, WNCN.com, Oct 24, 2016.; Web Staff, “Part of NC Correctional Facility Evacuated After Riot; About 500 Inmates Transferred,” Fox 8 News, MyFox8.com, Oct 24, 2016.; Amy Roux, “Correction and Law Enforcement Officers Bring Disturbance at Neuse Correctional Institution Under Control,” Goldsborodailynews.com, Oct 23, 2016.; Carol Bowden, Situation Developing at Neuse Correctional,” Goldsborodailynews.com, Oct 23, 2016.

34 Jean Casella and James Ridgeway, “Prisoners to Remain on Rikers Island As Hurricane Sandy Heads for New York,” SolitaryWatch.org, Oct 28, 2012.; “New York City Hurricane Evacuation Zones,” New York Times, Oct. 28, 2012.

35 For instance, in the 1993 Menard Correctional Center floods, Warden Wellborne broadcast a thank-you message across the Center, saying that “when we locked it up, I appreciate the way that you went to your cells and locked up.” Wellborne acknowledged inmates’ powerful capacity for choice; delaying evacuation relied in part on their acquiescence. See “Floods Threaten Illinois Prison,” All Things Considered, National Public Radio, NPR.org, July 24, 1993. In a more exceptional situation, in 1985 the Associated Press reported on a set of Nashville prisoners who intentionally flooded their prison

though, administrators' outward-looking reasons for avoiding evacuations reflected themselves in journalists' narrative emphases on threats to outside populations rather than to inmates.

When journalists did report on individual inmates' actions, most notably during the Kentucky state reformatory flood in 1937, a picture of the chaotic situation on the ground emerged through the details. The state reformatory in Frankfort sat just 3,500 feet from the Kentucky River, and a record-breaking flood crest meant that by late January, "more than 6 feet of water stood in the prison yard and reached into the cell blocks."<sup>36</sup> The three thousand inmates were without heat, drinking water or electricity for days, "[manning] pumps as the inundation invaded the prison."<sup>37</sup> Riots erupted. Reports that a dozen prisoners had been killed in the chaos spread across the country. Two dozen inmates reportedly tried to swim to dry land, re-encountering the arm of the state in the icy water. A warden reflected on these swimmers ruefully, boasting that "we could have shot them all down like rats in the water if we had wanted to [...] but that was not necessary. The water had them cut off and we caught them as soon as they tried to crawl out of it."<sup>38</sup> The flood both created and circumscribed the chaos of the prison. And as long as the flood could contain the prisoners, even if it prohibited the delivery of basic humane treatment, state administrators delayed evacuation.

Though the eventual evacuation several days later reportedly went smoothly, post-flood ambiguities forced readers to ask whether control over the prison had ever been

absolute.<sup>39</sup> During the first days of the flood, Governor Albert Benjamin "Happy" Chandler had cautioned that "We don't know how many, if any are dead. We will have no idea what the real situation is until the water goes down."<sup>40</sup> While Chandler intended to calm a hysterical national audience, his warning instead revealed the extent to which the state had lost its tight control over the prison. As the flood receded, the state's control and knowledge of the "real situation" before the flood appeared dubious as well. The rumors of a dozen dead appeared to be false. However, while one report stated that only one man remained unaccounted for, others pegged the number at seven. (Some maintained a much higher estimate of fifty.)<sup>41</sup> Revealingly, while the number of prisoners rescued was reported to be 3,111, the number of prisoners officially housed in the prison was only 2,906.<sup>42</sup> These discrepancies, uncovered but not produced by the flood, called into question whether or not the prisoners had ever truly been under a complete state surveillance.

After the flood, Governor "Happy" seemed to learn his lesson about the prison's placement, if not the prison's vulnerable administration, proclaiming that "we will never use this prison again."<sup>43</sup> Most public planners, however, ignored historical lessons about placing prisoners in risky locations. No situation demonstrated this state hubris and devaluation of incarcerated lives more clearly than the case of New Orleans' jails after Hurricane Katrina in August 2005.<sup>44</sup> Ironically, the Louisiana Department of Public Safety

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before a full riot to demand better treatment. See: Associated Press, "Angry Inmates Set Fires, Flood Cells in Tennessee Prison," AP News Archive, APNewsArchive.com, July 12, 1985.

- 36 Associated Press, "Dozen Convicts Reported Dead In Watery Cells; 2,900 Inmates Evacuated at Frankfort, Ky., After Rioting," Washington Post, Jan. 26, 1937. N. b.: The State Reformatory at Frankfort is erroneously referred to in most articles as the state penitentiary in Frankfort, which was the prison's name up until 1912. see "Kentucky State Penitentiary History," at <http://www.angelfire.com/ky/ksp/KSPhistory.htm>.
- 37 "140,000 Homeless, 16 Dead When Floods Smash All Records," Springfield Republican (Springfield, MA), Jan. 23, 1937.
- 38 Associated Press, "Icy Waters Balk Break by Convicts," New York Times, Jan. 24 1937. Other prisoners reportedly yelled out to Governor Chandler as he came by the prison in a motorboat to offer words of encouragement. "Hello, Happy!" the prisoners shouted. "Get us out of here - we're going to drown if you don't." Newspapers reported smiles on the prisoners' faces, a rather unbelievably cheerful image which reassured readers that calmness and order still prevailed. Governor "Happy" responded in kind: "Just sit tight and keep your chins up."

- 39 Governor "Happy" reportedly comforted every boatload of prisoners himself, the very portrait of state benevolence during crisis. (See: Associated Press, "All Life in Paducah Will Be Evacuated," New York Times, Jan 30, 1937.)
- 40 Associated Press, "100 Perish as Flooded Rivers Continue to Rise; 500,000 Flee Homes; 65,000 in City Homeless," Washington Post, Jan. 26, 1937. Associated Press, "Floods at a Glance," Dallas Morning News (Dallas, TX), Jan. 26, 1937; Associated Press, "Flooded Prison Safely Cleared; Seven Missing," Washington Post, Jan. 29, 1937; Associated Press, "U.S. Troops Are Sent to Kentucky to Fight Panic and Pestilence" Springfield Republican (Springfield, MA), Jan. 26, 1937.
- 41 Associated Press, "Flooded Prison Safely Cleared; Seven Missing," Washington Post, Jan. 29, 1937.
- 42 Associated Press, "40 Convicts Gone in Flood Exodus," New York Times, Jan 26, 1937.
- 43 Associated Press, "No Dead Are Discovered As Prison Flood Ebbs: 12 Had Been Reported Killed in Kentucky Rioting," New York Herald Tribune, Jan 26, 1937. The Kentucky State Reformatory now sits near Louisville, a full ten miles from the Ohio River. In an ironic twist, the Kentucky State Office Building occupies the prison's former Frankfort site (determined via Google Maps.)
- 44 It is worth noting that in the case of New Orleans and Hurricane Katrina, the location of the Orleans Parish Prison was not significantly closer to weak levees than many

& Corrections intended to meet with the administrators at the Orleans and Jefferson parish prisons early in the summer to discuss risk management, but these meetings never materialized. Several days before the hurricane, Orleans Parish Prison's sheriff refused to evacuate his prison, choosing to "defend in place" rather than deal with the daunting logistics of a potentially superfluous transfer.<sup>45</sup> Administrators at Jefferson Parish Prison also negligently delayed their decision to evacuate. However, the eventual, relatively early evacuation of Jefferson went smoothly, despite a lack of planning, fuel and emergency generators. This more orderly situation did not force corrections officers or journalists to grapple with and reflect on the humanness of the jails' inmates in a way that the Orleans Parish Prison's evacuation did.

The Orleans Parish Prison evacuation was an unnatural disaster, one that resulted not just from enormous flooding but from administrators' decisions to not prioritize inmate safety or treatment. Once the levees broke, the city flooded fast; five to six feet of water quickly surrounded the prison, immediately flooding the basement where the backup generators were located.<sup>46</sup> As the floods threatened to leave the prison entirely inaccessible, many deputies abandoned the prison. Once the prison was inundated, administrators feared losing control of prisoners during an under-planned and under-anticipated evacuation, so they left many prisoners in their cells as they filled with up to six feet of sewage-contaminated water. In their testimony to the American Civil Liberties Union, inmates #38 and #52, amongst dozens of others, reported that some inmates smashed windows to let in air and that escaping prisoners were shot at.<sup>47</sup> The remaining guards focused on maintaining a semblance of control rather than saving and protecting inmates' lives. As Inmate #34 summarized, "there was nothing but more confusion accompanied with pepper spray." Guards at both the parish prison and at the eventual evacuation sites physically and verbally abused inmates, with little to no oversight. The absence of an adequate evacuation plan and a lack of political

will from politicians to mandate an evacuation of the parish prison demonstrated that prisoners' lives were worth less to the city than its non-incarcerated residents.

The legal and extralegal violence perpetrated against inmates in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, while exceptional in its intensity and brutality, fit into a larger pattern of environmental racism in Louisiana that was exposed but not produced by the broken levees. When state control over the prison system broke down during Katrina, inmates were rendered more vulnerable, not more empowered.<sup>48</sup> Yet state-sanctioned violence often contributed to inmates' disempowerment and their initial placement in the prison. Discriminatory housing policy in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century pushed Black freedmen towards the least valuable, lowest-lying homes in the city. Underfunded schools and employment discrimination kept Black families poor.<sup>49</sup> These patterns stretched from well before the flood of 1927 to after the hurricane in 2005, and everyone from musicians and artists to policymakers recognized that Katrina was not an isolated incident. At a benefit concert for hurricane relief, Marcia Bell covered "Louisiana, 1927," an apt song for the moment.<sup>50</sup> Jalil A. Muntaqim's poem "Katrina!!!" in *We Are Our Own Liberators: Selected Prison Writings* reads:

"Hurricane Carter did 25 years for a crime he did not commit, a prime example of American justice personified. Hurricanes in America always screw poor folks."<sup>51</sup>

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other neighborhoods of the city. Thus, the "devaluation of incarcerated lives," specifically referring to effects of floods, occurred during and after the flood. With regard to New Orleans, the "state hubris" of building in "risky locations" must be interpreted more broadly, encompass wider politics of levees, construction and risk management in New Orleans as a whole. See John Barry, *Rising Tide* for a further discussion.

45 Jeffrey A. Schwartz and David Webb, "Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and the Louisiana Dept. of Public Safety and Corrections," NIC Technical Assistance Report Technical Assistance No. 06P1035, AmericanBar.org, May 2006, 15.

46 Schwartz and Webb, "Hurricanes Katrina and Rita," 18.

47 "Testimonials from Inmates Incarcerated at Orleans Parish Prison during Hurricane Katrina," American Civil Liberties Union, ACLU.org.

48 David Rohde and Christopher Drew "The Inmates: Prisoners Evacuated After Hurricane Allege Abuse," *New York Times*, Oct 2, 2005.; Barry Gerharz and Seung Hong, "Down By Law," *Dollars & Sense* 264 (Mar/Apr 2006): 39.

49 Daphne Spain, "Race Relations and Residential Segregation in New Orleans: Two Centuries of Paradox," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 441, *Race and Residence in American Cities* (Jan., 1979), pp. 82-96.

50 The song's lyric of "someone people got lost in the flood/ some people got away all right" begs the question of who received which fate and why, while the mournful line of "Oh Louisiana. They're tryin' to wash us away" makes plain the connection between the social and environmental roots of disaster. Interestingly, this song was originally written by Randy Newman, and the original lyric of "poor cracker's land" makes clear that the song was originally about the plight of the poor white man in the wake of the flood. I have interpreted it here as it was relevant to the plight of poor, primarily Black people in the wake of Katrina. My careful re-characterization of "Louisiana, 1927" is further supported by its performance by Aaron Neville, one of New Orleans' most famous residents, at the NAACP Image Awards in 2011. See "Hurricane Katrina Benefit Concert - Louisiana 1927," PHubb, Youtube.com.

51 Jalil A. Muntaqim, *We Are Our Own Liberators: Selected Prison Writings*, (Arissa Media Group, 2010), 245.

The racist structures which kept the vulnerable and incarcerated perpetually vulnerable and incarcerated were most obvious in disaster, but they were always at work. Katrina did not rupture this pattern of violence in the long or the short term. Less than two weeks after the hurricane, though standing water still covered much of the city, rescuers worked long shifts, and stores and hospitals remained closed, a makeshift jail had been set up at the Greyhound bus station. The city had its priorities. The converted station held people accused of looting the flooded city until they could be processed and sent upriver, to St. Gabriel prison, or to Angola.<sup>52</sup>

Few prisons so precisely embody the historical-geographical relationship between plantation and prison in the United States as the Louisiana State Penitentiary commonly known as Angola. Unsurprisingly, no other American prison has also been so consistently threatened by floods. The 18,000-acre property that now constitutes the largest maximum-security prison in the country was pieced together from a collection of antebellum sugarcane and cotton plantations.<sup>53</sup> The largest was named Angola, after the country of origin of the plantation's slaves. The name stuck, even after the State of Louisiana converted the plantation-turned-private-prison into a publicly-run prison farm in 1901.<sup>54</sup> Angola sits nestled into an oxbow on the east bank of the Lower Mississippi (see Figure 2). Across the river, slightly to the North, now lies the Old River Control Structure, opened in 1963 to "be in charge of what might happen" there.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, Angola prison seeks to exercise a flawless authority over its population, made up mostly of Black men. Yet just like the Old River Control Structure, which almost collapsed during the Mississippi flood of 1973, Angola prison has never been able to keep out the physical forces that invade and overwhelm this state-sanctioned space of containment, control and forced labor.

The recurring instances of flooding at Angola rarely led to riots or evacuation, but they nonetheless revealed much about the structure and perceived value of a life lived there. In the 1912 flood, one of the main levees protecting the prison broke, inundating "the convict plantation" and the surrounding lands.



Figure 2. Map of Angola.  
Source: AngolaMuseum.org.

Whether and how an evacuation occurred is unknown; the *Indianapolis Star* found this detail less important than the endangerment of a \$500,000 sugar refinery recently built on the prison plantation.<sup>56</sup> Running counter to the Army Corps of Engineers' narrative of ever-improving levees and flood control, flooding threats in recent years at Angola have been even more severe. Over the next century, floods consistently threatened Angola's acres; fears of evacuation surfaced in 1927, 1973, 1983, 1997 and 2011.<sup>57</sup> Reflecting on the '73 floods as the river rose again in '83, the State Police Commander Grover Garrison remembered his fear that "there was no place to put the prisoners if we had had to move them." In his reflection, Garrison revealed a negligent lack of

52 Alex Berenson, "With Jails Flooded, Bus Station Fills the Void," *New York Times*, Sep 7, 2005.

53 David Oshinsky, "The View From Inside," *New York Times*, June 11, 2010.

54 Thomas Beller, "Angola Prison and the Shadow of Slavery," *The New Yorker*, August 19, 2015.

55 John McPhee, *The Control of Nature*, (New York: Farrar, Strous and Giroux, 1989), 12.

56 "Dike Break Releases Flood on Prison Land," *Indianapolis Star*, May 3, 1912.

57 In 1997, over half of Angola prison's approximately 6,000 inmates were moved to a similar tent city on higher ground within the plantation. (See: "Flooding Forces Evacuation of Prison," *Los Angeles Times*, March 26, 1997; Adam Nossiter, "New Orleans Rests, Assured of Protection from Floods," *New York Times*, Mar 29, 1997.) In 2011, the ever-present threat of flooding finally forced a partial evacuation. (See: Katja Pumm, "Louisiana State Prison 'Angola' Evacuated for First Time in History," *Vincentsimmons.iippi.org*, 2011; *International Wire*, "Flood Forces Evacuations," May 17, 2011.) See also: "The Unique Burial Practices at the Louisiana State Penitentiary," *Historichouston1836.com*; Associated Press, "Flood Stricken Valley Hit With More Rain," *Mobile Register* (Mobile, AL), April 7, 1973; United Press International, "Flood Danger At Peak; 10,000 Threatened; Mississippi Delta Region Threatened," *Los Angeles Times*, April 7, 1973; Associated Press, "Levees May Avert Prison Evacuation," *Dallas Morning News* (Dallas, TX), May 30, 1983.

planning for inmates' wellbeing. By the 1983 flood, Angola staff had learned their lesson. They had procedure: "we've practiced this in training drills—timed the routes, checked for highway construction and obstructions." They also had priorities; Garrison reassured the public that "protecting people in the area where inmates are taken has been the first consideration in planning."<sup>58</sup>

In their efforts to mitigate flood risks, Angola administrators often relied not only on individual inmates' acquiescence and patience, but also on their continued forced labor. In the 2011 partial evacuation, Angola Warden Burl Cain only sent away weak and elderly inmates, proclaiming stubbornly that:

"We're not going to panic and run away and give away this farm. We're the same people who fought the '97 flood. I was there then. We're very experienced flood fighters, and I have more resources than the Corps has, because I have all these inmates."<sup>59</sup>

Even as Warden Cain fought to keep inmates within Angola's fences, he relied on their labor. And like all labor at Angola, sandbagging paid pennies per hour—if it paid anything at all. In "The Farm," a documentary film on Angola, Warden Cain commented that "It's like a big plantation in days gone by. We hate to call it that in a way, but it kinda is."<sup>60</sup> While Angola prison always relied (and continues to rely) on inmates' labor, floods rendered this acute dependence particularly obvious.

Indeed all across the American South, when floods threatened the safety of non-incarcerated communities and people, inmates often shouldered the burdens of rescue and reinforcement. In 1937, 1939 and 1972, amongst other instances, wardens sent inmates to rescue children and families trapped on their flooded lands.<sup>61</sup> While the historical

record contains only sparse evidence of prisoners being sent on rescue missions, the tradition of convict leasing to build, repair and reinforce levees is robustly documented.<sup>62</sup> In Mississippi in 1912, an engineer ordered hundreds of convicts to lie on top of a shaky levee to physically reinforce it, while Parchman Farm sent crews across the state during the 1927 floods.<sup>63</sup> In 1930, one prisoner recollected from his time at a levee camp that unlike a slave, who was "a rather valuable piece of property," a convict "could be replaced at any time at the state's expense" and was treated accordingly.<sup>64</sup>

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sparse, and most evidence survives in grey literature, cultural memory and fictionalized accounts. (For historical evidence, see: Associated Press, "No Dead Are Discovered As Prison Flood Ebbs," *New York Herald Tribune*; "Flood Traps 500 Children in Mountains," *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 4, 1939.; Arthur Everett, "Floods in East Major Disaster," *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans, LA), June 24, 1972.) For a contemporaneous fictional account, see William Faulkner's "Old Man." In "Old Man," the state sends two convicts from "The Farm"—probably a fictionalized Parchman Farm—to rescue refugees. The story opens with a scene of the unnamed convicts listening to rain, hoping it will continue until the Mississippi's levees break and the floods forcefully upend convicts' usual schedules of fieldwork. Faulkner writes in the opening lines, "there is no walled penitentiary in Mississippi; it is a cotton plantation." While Faulkner only intends to describe the structure of the prison, his line forecasts the fluidity of the prison which he addresses in "Old Man." See: William Faulkner, *Three Famous Short Novels: Spotted Horses, Old Man, The Bear*, (Vintage, 2011).

62 While many states outlawed convict leasing early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the practice continued. For example, though Mississippi banned convict leasing in 1906, the state leased out convict laborers throughout the first half of the century. These convicts were sent to farms and factories as well as levee camps. Much of the documentation of these practices has been folkloric. For instance, the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century song, "Joe Turner Blues," warns of a man named Joe Turner, infamous in Tennessee for leasing convicted Black men to farms along the Mississippi. (See: "They Tell Me Joe Turner's Come and Gone: Music, Prison, & the Convict Lease System," *USPrisonCulture*, Nov 28, 2010.). Additionally, even when convict leasing had ceased in normal, everyday conditions, it often resumed during floods and other environmental emergencies. In "Shack Bullies and Levee Contractors: Bluesmen as Ethnographers," John Cowley describes how the Army Corps of Engineers' subcontractors "held their Black employees as peons. The employers were, in consequence, not squeamish about who worked for them and, sometimes, prisoners continued to be used, particularly in times of flood." (See: John Cowley, "Shack Bullies and Levee Contractors: Bluesmen as Ethnographers," *Journal of Folklore Research*, Vol. 28, No. 2/3 (1991), 138.)

63 John Barry, *Rising Tide*, pages 131 and 195

64 James L. King, "A Convict's View of Prison Life," *The Hartford Courant*, Sep 7, 1930. This perception of the lack of value of convicted individuals' lives receives a broader, more academic treatment in Mancini's *One Dies, Get Another: Convict Leasing*

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58 Jua Nyla Hutcheson, "Floods Threaten Angola," *The Times-Picayune The States-Item* (New Orleans, LA), May 27, 1983.

59 Sandra Gonzalez, "Angola Prison Prepares as Mississippi Rises," *McClatchy-Tribune Business News* (Washington), May 5, 2011.

60 n.b. Warden Cain was not known for his cruelty; rather, inmates and outsiders alike remembered him for his reformist streak and how he "opened up the door of opportunity" to intra-prison achievements. As one prisoner during Cain's tenure recounted, "you can still have a life inside. Inmates and administrators agreed; Angola was a much better place under Warden Cain, even as he sanctioned convict labor and verbally tripped around defining the modern-day plantation slavery that he oversaw. (See Eric Eckholm, "Bible College Helps Some at Louisiana Prison Find Peace," *New York Times*, Oct. 5, 2013.; Whitney Benns, "American Slavery, Reinvented," *The Atlantic* (Online), Sep 21, 2015.; Liz Garbus and Wilbert Rideau, "The Farm: Angola, USA," Documentary, 1998, via *Youtube.com*.)

61 The printed record of prisoners' acting as rescuers is quite

The state pushed prisoners' bodies and their labor to the most dangerous and vulnerable pressure points in their flood control regime, exposing prisoners to the greatest risks of the fragile system.

Yet not everyone at levee camps was convicted and then leased out for these backbreaking undertakings—many ended up on riverbanks via other coercive means. Often in levee camps, especially the frenetic ones that cropped up to reinforce levees before an impending flood, directors minimized the distinction between prisoner and laborer, creating “virtual prisons and slave labor markets.”<sup>65</sup> They subordinated categories of “free” and “unfree” to the more visible “black” and “white,” forcing non-incarcerated men to do unpaid work that the U.S. Constitution (and certainly no broader moral authority) only permitted convicts to do. Revealing again the striking codependence between social and spatial control, John Barry chronicled how politicians in Greenville, Mississippi left Black Mississippians trapped on the levees in 1927 to ensure the Black labor supply would return to the white-owned plantations after the floodwaters subsided.<sup>66</sup> Black men across the South wrote and sang about the difficulty and monotony of working at levee camps.<sup>67</sup> Alice Pearson’s “Greenville Levee Blues” lamented this abusive system, wherein Black men maintained levees, connected supply chains and rescued trapped, mostly white residents from surrounding areas in exchange for food.<sup>68</sup> The blurred definitions of freedom brought on by flood emergencies referenced historically fluid forms of racialized imprisonment, of which, as Michelle Alexander and Angela Davis discuss, the modern prison is only one.<sup>69</sup> Though workers were not always convicts, levee camps housed a labor structure indistinguishable, except perhaps in its increased illegality, from convict leasing.

While the abuses of the system have been curbed, stories of convict labor on the banks of flooding rivers still surface in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Much of this labor happens within prison fences, as incarcerated individuals stack sandbags on the levees that protect their involuntary residences.<sup>70</sup> Some of these reinforcement efforts occur outside the spaces of

the prison, and inmates usually receive decent pay for their work.<sup>71</sup> Yet the facetious rhetoric that hides the involuntary nature of the work persists. In 1993, *The New York Times* reported an uplifting story about a collaborative effort in which community members, National Guardsmen and inmates worked together to reinforce levees. While the *Times* cheerfully proclaimed, “everyone but the National Guard is a volunteer in the battle against the Mississippi River,” the inmates were only volunteers under the word’s most deceitful, specific definition of “unpaid.” Similarly, the *Times*’ closing scene, wherein “a gang of prison inmates were singing in the rain, throwing sandbags” conveyed an image of joy and collaboration that masked the state-sanctioned arrogance which had placed those prisoners on the levee, so similar to the hubris of the engineers who had placed the levees there in the first place.<sup>72</sup>

Floods highlighted the fluidity and permeability of the prison borders most visibly, but they also demonstrated the extent to which the state maintained its power over prisoners’ bodies. However, other subtler flows further undermined notions of complete control: from pop culture, inmate artwork and blues songs to tourists for the Angola Rodeo.<sup>73</sup> These expressions “allow inmates to sustain a social integrity that, to some degree, neutralizes a status tied solely to incarceration.”<sup>74</sup> Though wardens and guards dutifully tried to keep prisoners laboring within fields like Angola’s, they could not keep out the physical and cultural forces of the outside world. State-sanctioned power still guided the movement of the convict, but voices like those of (anti)prison bluesmen find space to create “certain promising strategies of endurance and hopes of liberation.”<sup>75</sup> These forms of creative production by prisoners, as well as news narratives that highlighted inmates’ individuality, illustrated and even created fragility in the austere system. As floods both demonstrated and undermined the control of the state over the spatiality of

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*in the American South.*

65 *Nobody Knows Where the Blues Come From: Lyrics and History*, ed. by Robert Springer, (U. Press of Mississippi, 2006), 6.

66 Barry, *Rising Tide*.

67 *Songs About Work: Essays in Occupational Culture*, ed. by Archie Green, (Bloomington, IN: Special Publication of the Folklore Institute No. 3, 1993), 144.

68 *Nobody Knows Where the Blues Come From*, 43.

69 See Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, “Introduction” and Davis, “Slavery, Civil Rights and Abolitionist Perspectives Toward Prison,” *Are Prisons Obsolete?* 26-27.

70 “ADC Inmate Crews Busy in East Arkansas,” *Arkansas Department of Correction*, May 13, 2011.

71 Michael P. Buffer, “Prison Approves Payments to Inmates for Flood Cleanup,” *McClatchy – Tribune Business News* (Washington), Oct 19, 2011.

72 Sarah Rimer, “Along the Levee As People Fight A Tireless River: Fighting the River Manning the Battle Line Against the Mississippi,” *New York Times*, July 14, 1993.

73 No prison blues song discovered in this historical analysis directly described prison floods. However, their descriptions of inmates’ emotions and desires—as well as the transport of these songs into non-incarcerated spaces—subverted structures of institutionalization and control.

74 Hal Cannon, “The Music of Louisiana’s Angola State Penitentiary,” *National Public Radio*, August 5, 2011; Melissa Schrift, “Angola Prison Art: Captivity, Creativity, and Consumerism,” *Journal of American Folklore* 119, No. 473 (2006): 257-274.

75 Smith, *The Prison*, 144.

the prison and the physicality of the prisoner, other, revealed forms of creative resistance further subverted full state authority.

### Conclusion

While riparian floods rarely sparked a total breakdown in state control over either prisoners' bodies or a prison's spatiality, flood events threatened the hubristic, oppressive notions of complete social and environmental control expressed in maximum security prisons and massive levees. Floods showcased the weaknesses of these apparatuses of control, even if when the waters receded the state managed to reassert and reclaim its dominant position, repairing levees and drying-out cell blocks. When situated within parallel theories of social and environmental control, the historical intersections between floods and prisons take on a much broader significance, with consequences that deeply affect both the work of state-builders and the arguments of their critics.

Just as with systematic flood control, the rigidity and complexity of the American prison system makes it appear impregnable and unyielding, yet, albeit in subtler ways than a crevassed levee, its inflexibility is also its fragility. Scientifically-minded critiques of levees-only policies—and comprehensive flood control projects more generally—create enormous potential for an apt, parallel critique of the American criminal justice system. Critics of flood control claim that these political projects eliminate frequent small floods but increase the risks of rare, disastrous ones; similarly, the prison system curbs smaller societal transgressions but creates systematic inequality with much broader and more dangerous effects. Flood control projects also require ever-increasing resources to sustain themselves and to protect from the larger and larger disasters that these projects enable. In the same vein, mass incarceration in the United States demands greater and greater resources as it undermines inmates mental health and job prospects, thus contributing to poverty, racial segregation and increasing American inequality.

Finally, floods reveal much about the differentiated value of life in the United States as the state places incarcerated individuals in situations of elevated physical risk and emotional discomfort during emergency events. Yet inadequately few aspects of this power relationship has been addressed from the perspective of inmates themselves. Save for the testimonials of inmates in New Orleans during Katrina, most of the vivid experiences of the prisoners who helped bolster levees and who were trapped in flooded prisons have been lost to history. Journalistic angles and institutional policies that privilege concerns about safety *from* inmates over concerns *for* inmates' well-being during socio-natural disasters contribute to a cultural and legal system that devalues the

lives and experiences of incarcerated individuals. The lack of popular and scholarly interest in elevating, recording and analyzing incarcerated voices during these moments of uncertainty also contributes to the erasure of the intersections between floods and prisons from historical records and popular memory. Without these messy counter-narratives of evacuation and lived emotion, the threat that floods embody to hegemonic state control over spaces of incarceration obscures itself and eventually disappears entirely.