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The River in Reverse: Flood Imaginaries, Old and New

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Abstract

In this article, we turn to consider a specific region, and genre, that has spawned its own narrative tradition of environmentally perceptive songlore – the flood chronicles of the Mississippi Delta. Both real and mythological, this area constitutes a fertile source for the evolution of what we propose to call aesthetic imaginaries, and the article demonstrates how a distinct “flood imaginary” resonates through a specific tradition of songwriting, emerging and re-emerging with a set of poetic and musical tropes, serving different artistic purposes across time.

Keywords: aesthetic imaginaries, flood imaginaries, songwriting, environmental humanities, The Mississippi Delta, Memphis Minnie, Led Zeppelin, Charley Patton, Bob Dylan, Randy Newman, Allen Toussaint and Elvis Costello

I. Down in the Flood. Introduction

Commenting on inter-state cooperation on flood-control systems during the flooding in the Mississippi River Basin that lasted for months in 2019, John Brummet of the *Northwest Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* wrote: “[S]omebody has to be down-river when waters rage.” Addressing the political implications of the challenging dispositions facing the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, whose strategies will in effect determine where the

flooding hits hardest, Brummet commented that “rivers flow in ways we know.” Downpour in Oklahoma, he wrote, will inevitably follow the Arkansas River to the Mississippi River. By way of introduction to these remarks, the reporter cited Randy Newman’s “Louisiana 1927” (1974) and its fictional depiction of a visit of then-President Calvin Coolidge to Louisiana, who, in Newman’s lyrics, declares, “Isn’t it a shame what the river has done to this poor cracker’s land?.” It was not the first time Newman’s song appeared in the event of a flood disaster, and most likely not the last. In an entry on Hurricane Katrina in their history of literary America, Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors observe how Newman performed “Louisiana 1927” again and again in the period following the damaging tropical cyclone that struck the southeastern United States in August 2005: “The song seemed loosed from any event, a floating song, waiting as much as looking back” (1040).

In this article, we consider a specific region, and genre, that has spawned its own narrative tradition of environmentally perceptive songlore, the flood chronicles of the Mississippi Delta. Characterized as “the world’s most bountiful sonic ground,” this area, both real and mythological, constitutes a fertile source for the evolution of what we propose to call aesthetic imaginaries (Petrusich 63). Indeed, it is hard to overestimate the significance of the 1927 flood for any narrative of the musical traditions that grow out of the region. Introducing his history of the delta blues, Ted Gioia observes that, although there is no consensus on how to begin such a story, the event of the flood belongs among the most frequently mentioned candidates (7). In what follows, we would like to argue that a distinct “flood imaginary” resonates through a specific tradition of songwriting, emerging and re-emerging with a particular set of poetic and musical tropes, serving different artistic purposes across time.

II. The Role of the Imaginary in the Environmental Humanities

Aesthetic imaginaries, we would like to claim, represent a potentially significant knowledge base for a more dynamic conception of environmental studies, one that goes beyond natural science, technology

studies, posthumanism, object-oriented ontology, and the new materialism that to some extent has come to define the so-called environmental humanities. The position we want to explore is eloquently presented in an article by Babette Tischleder, who remains skeptical of the foregrounding of nonhuman agency in the work of leading materialist scholars such as Jane Bennett and Bruno Latour. Her argument revolves around the observation that the life of non-anthropomorphic entities can, in the end, be understood “only within our earth-bound existence and through the imaginative forms of worlding that literature, art, and other cultural expressions afford” (129). In other words, however radically different things such as animals, trees, rocks, and rivers are from the world of human cultures – not to mention those phenomena Timothy Morton refers to as *hyperobjects* (i.e. global warming, radioactive plutonium) – they are still rather inextricable from human consciousness and the processes of rationalization, aestheticization, and narrativization that it enables. This should be as evident from Newman’s particular 1974 take on the 1927 events, as it is from Tischleder’s own recounting of a trip on the river, prompting a recollection of the water’s sway as the sun is setting, which she notes to be characterized less by its narrative than by its aesthetic properties. For what or who would serve as what Bennett in her object-oriented ontology refers to as “actants” in Tischleder’s evocative passages? “The sea, the currents, the breeze?” A scene so “suffused with humanness,” Tischleder writes, “does not square with a philosophy oriented toward objects as objects,” in which “entities come into their own at a remote distance from human knowledge, design, and desire” (126). Likewise, what leads Brummet to cite Newman’s song 35 years after it was released on the album *Good Old Boys* (Reprise, 1974) is the songwriter’s satirical depiction of a presidential visit to the site of disaster. Tischleder’s proposition is to consider “the modes in which objects afford, affect, and mold, but also challenge and trouble social practices, memories, self-images, affective bonds, and cultural orientations” (129).

As it happens, Tischleder’s argument comes to terms with new materialism’s engagement with key texts in the literary history of precisely the Mississippi, more specifically Latour’s reading of Mark Twain’s *Life on the Mississippi* (1883). Through an analysis of William

Faulkner's story "Mississippi," she offers the suggestion that literature, through its fictional properties and its particular form of world-building, is representative of a form of theoretical thinking in its own right (129). Our critical engagement with literary expression can thus take the shape of a kind of philosophical criticism revolving around humanism and the humanities, not entirely unlike that offered by David N. Rodowick in *Philosophy's Artful Conversation* (2015) and *An Education in Judgment: Hannah Arendt and the Humanities* (2021), both of which we find instructive in our engagement with the flood imaginary. Having deep sympathy and respect for the critical work of posthumanism, "above all in the context of environmental criticism and animal ethics," Rodowick admits that something has always troubled him about the concept of the "posthuman," namely "the assumption that at some point we knew, whether mistakenly or not, what being human means" (xiv). With reference to the writings of Hannah Arendt, Rodowick outlines a form of philosophical inquiry in which

in the absence of providence, humans must continually negotiate, in plurality and community, the truth that defines their history and their actions, indeed, their politics, and it is up to humankind, from moment to unpredictable moment, to define collectively the ethical shape of its common existence. (xiv)

The continuous renegotiation of historical experience that Rodowick discusses is also a part of the environmental humanities, and an irrepressible vehicle for this process is the work of the cultural imagination. Below, we consider some of the prominent tributaries of what we term flood imaginaries, with the hope of showing how they might contribute to our knowledge base concerning river ecologies.

III. Floods and the Musical Tradition

When the Mississippi overtopped banks and then levees in the spring and summer of 1927, the destruction was unprecedented. The flood inundated more than 27,000 square miles of cropland across ten states. It remains the worst river flood in the history of the US, and its shattering impact was

followed by a decade-long project by the Army Corps of Engineers to radically reshape the river. Over a dozen of the river's well-known meanders were cut by artificial channels, and flow capacity was enforced by regular dredging. By the early 1940s, the lower Mississippi was being treated more like an artificial canal than a free-flowing river – it had become much shorter, deeper, and faster, and could handle 50 percent more water than before (Rankin 15). The immediate and long-term effects of the 1927 flood are vast, wide-ranging, and expansive, suggesting that it belongs among the events that will only continue to be subject to historical analysis and revisionist narratives.

The catastrophic flood of 1927, as well as that of 1937, caused untold material damage and left a substantial number of people homeless (an estimated 750,000 in the wake of the April 21, 1927, overflowing of the levee above Greenville alone), precipitating a massive displacement that at least in part occasioned the Great Migration of African Americans from the Delta to the North and the Midwest. Since this demographic alteration saw the birth of the electrified Chicago blues, one could suggest, as does English professor Philip Horne, that the colossal flooding of the Mississippi circuitously engendered rock and roll music (65). If the deluge narratives can be grasped with reference to an aesthetic imaginary, they also comprise a wider set of subjects at the intersection of ecological precarity and socio-economic power structures. A mere century and a half ago, the poet, singer, and editor Keith Flynn notes the Delta was a “howling wilderness,” consisting of “cypress swamps and forbidden dunes” that were then transformed “with great effort and human blood into cotton, peanut, and tobacco fields” (103). It was these historical-material circumstances that yielded those “vivid narratives” dealing with “love, loss, death, and voodoo” that were absorbed into the blues, which Flynn sees as “the most moving art form in our cultural history” (103).

As David Evans observes in his important survey of songs recorded by African Americans about the flood, it “served to give focus to many of the essential personal concerns found in the text of blues and gospel songs in general.” From its earliest instances, the songwriting that engages with the event does so through an array of themes and perspectives, coming from victims, friends, and community members, supplementing news

reports and official documents in their own significant way (Evans). Evans demonstrates that some of the best-known songs believed to chronicle the events of the flood are so strongly associated with it that they will continue to be so, in spite of the fact that they have their origins elsewhere. A song such as “Back-Water Blues,” for instance, is more likely to have been composed by Bessie Smith after she experienced a flood in Nashville, where she had an engagement late in 1926 and over the first days of the new year, at the Bijou theater, close to the flooded section of the city. Citing news reports from the time, Evans finds that these, as well as the circumstances that surrounded her visit, strongly suggest that they have served as sources for the song’s lyrics. And yet, as he points out, it is hard not to see “Back-Water Blues” as “part of the complex of songs” about the Mississippi flood, not least since “the Cumberland River drains into the Ohio River and eventually into the Mississippi.” It is only one among several instances in his article to serve as a reminder that poetic license, mythologization, as well as allegory and symbolism, are integral to the narrativization and configuration of historical events such as these into songwriting. Furthermore, several prominent, individual songs depicting the flood have come to belong to more artists than one, allowing for entire genealogies of artistic and lyrical re-imagination through the decades, and this, Evans reminds us, is an activity that can be traced back to the very earliest performances and recordings of the period in which it took place.

IV. When the Levee Breaks: Memphis Minnie, Led Zeppelin, and Charley Patton

Thus, certain songs take on a meandering, unpredictable movement not entirely unlike the river itself, across years and decades, producing interpretations and re-interpretations around every bend, allowing individual compositions to provide a sort of forum for an ongoing conversation of the kind Tischleder or Rodowick proposes, one that inspires philosophical and critical thought. With its central place in the distinguished lineage of blues ballads about the 1927 flood, Memphis Minnie and Kansas Joe McCoy’s “When the Levee Breaks” – possibly the

most famous of all flood songs – begins rather ominously in medias res. “If it keeps on rainin’,” the first-person narrator intones, a series of horrific calamities will ensue: the levee will be crushed, the water will “come in,” and the narrator’s home will be washed away, along with those of countless others. A fever dream of a song, “When the Levee Breaks” is soaked in a palpable sense of desperation and impending pandemonium. The narrator works frenziedly on the levee “both night and day,” but to no avail, since nothing will “keep the water away,” and neither tears nor prayer will help. In the end, the narrator is forced to abandon his “baby” and his “happy home” with the resigned insight that “[i]t’s a mean old levee/cause me to weep and moan.”

Recorded in New York City on June 18, 1929, the twelve-bar acoustic blues was the couple’s first session for Columbia, and it was issued as a 78rpm phonograph later that summer. It has since been included on several compilation albums both by Memphis Minnie and miscellaneous artists. Most listeners today probably know the song by way of Led Zeppelin’s interpretation, which closes out their fourth album, *Led Zeppelin IV* (Atlantic, 1971). Retaining a substantial chunk of the original lyrics, Zeppelin’s version also makes some noteworthy alterations and additions.¹ In the 1929 version, the depiction of the levee as “mean” and “old” only occurs toward the very end of the song, whereas in the 1971 re-reading these adjectives open the second verse. More significantly, the narrator in Zeppelin’s song proclaims that he is leaving for Chicago (McCoy and Memphis Minnie’s original lyrics are devoid of any place names), and that he is “sorry” that he cannot take his girlfriend with him. Yet he sounds slightly less sorry than in the 1929 song, in which the manner of his leaving seems more reluctant. In musical terms, the two songs are obviously very different. Zeppelin’s version commences with one of the most eagerly sampled drum patterns in all of popular music (Beastie Boys, Björk, Massive Attack, Dr. Dre, Beyonce, Coldcut, MC Lyte, Eminem, Sophie B. Hawkins), ushering in the song’s unusually portentous vibe. Jimmy Page’s electric guitar and Robert Plant’s frantically wailing harmonica come in after seven seconds, establishing a mood of ubiquitous menace that never lets up. We are already one minute and twenty-four seconds into the song before Page’s voice is first heard,

his opening line replicating McCoy's to the letter. Zeppelin's droning apocalyptic blues is nothing if not visceral, even dizzyingly so, an effect likely achieved by recording the song in divergent tempos and slowing down parts.

McCoy and Memphis Minnie's "When the Levee Breaks" was preceded by other prominent flood songs, such as Smith's aforementioned "Backwater Blues" and Barbecue Bob's (Robert Hicks) "Mississippi Heavy Water Blues" (1928), and it was succeeded by another classic, Charley Patton's "High Water Everywhere," in December 1929. Smith's contribution to the flood imaginary emphasizes the immediacy of the crisis, as does "When the Levee Breaks," in which the fearful packing of one's belongings and the last-minute escape is dramatized. "'Cause my house fell down," the song's narrator tells us, "[a]nd I can't live there no more." In "Mississippi Heavy Water Blues," the speaker also loses his house, although, understandably, he seems far more concerned by the disappearance of his girlfriend and the general absence of female companions in the wake of the flood. "Ain't no womens out here," he laments, "for they all got washed away." Despite the urgency of his predicament, the narrator still finds it apposite to interject a comment about his own prowess: "[a]in't no one satisfy her like her sweet papa do." Considerably more somber is the two-part "High Water Everywhere," which might be the starkest and bleakest of the late 1920s blues compositions about the flood. In its second part, Evans observes, Patton takes on multiple perspectives, those of "a reporter, an eye-witness, a flood victim himself, and one of the rescuers," as one single person being all of these "was not unusual for someone in the flood zone." The intense performance ends on a note of dark finality, "I couldn't see nobody's home and wasn't no one to be found."

In its earliest iterations, as in the original version of "When the Levee Breaks," the flood imaginary revolves around a form of poetic and musical narrativization and dramatization which is raw with fresh, authentic detail. Depiction revolves around a specific kind of imagery, the lasting resonance of which results in a tropology of its own, repeatedly revisited and reimagined, as when Led Zeppelin turns to "When the Levee Breaks" in a studio in Hampshire in 1970. Eventually, Evans observes,

the flood becomes more than anything “a symbol of some pressing circumstance that compels one to leave Mississippi.” When the last original mention appears in a gospel song recorded by Alan Lomax in Clarksdale in the summer of 1942, during the Second World War, fifteen years after the event and many disasters later, the singer “merely mentions the flood in a list of disasters that had struck Mississippi” (Evans).

In his study of flood songs, Horne marvels at the genre’s permanency across three quarters of a century, observing “how richly the temporalities of flood – before, during, after – are charged, so that fluid shifts between them allow potentially kaleidoscopic, fragmented representations of doom and disaster” (46). This prismatic quality is neatly encapsulated not only by Zeppelin’s modernized rendition of “When the Levee Breaks” – which in its mention of Chicago telegraphs the Great Migration, which in the narrative present of the song is yet to take place – but also in Bob Dylan’s considerable involvement with the genre.

V. High Water Revisited: Bob Dylan’s Art of Invocation

“The singer is in love with a musical past that’s gone forever,” critic Alex Ross wrote of *Time Out of Mind* (Columbia, 1997), a couple of years after it came out, suggesting that the songs on the album were “about the loneliness of listening.” Although one could argue that Dylan’s oeuvre has continued to carve out the contours of a playlist of solitude and reminiscence in the years that have followed this observation, his songwriting is also an art of preservation, a demonstration of endurance through performance, of making things last by way of continuing to make them. Although he has always drawn on musical and literary traditions and integrated their elements into his own music, it has defined his artistic output differently in his later years, and in particular after “*Love and Theft*,” whose title in quotation marks is widely interpreted as a subtle meta-statement on its reference to Eric Lott’s *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (1993). In his Nobel Lecture in 2016, Dylan describes a gradual, accumulative osmosis that shapes the distinctive aspects of his work, in the sense that he picked up the

vernacular and internalized it: “I had all the vernacular down. I knew the rhetoric. None of it went over my head – the devices, the techniques, the secrets, the mysteries – and I knew all the deserted roads that it traveled, too.” This internalization of the vernacular also includes Dylan’s take on the flood imaginary and his engagement with its aesthetic traditions.

In placing familiar tropes and aesthetic figures at the center of his songwriting, Dylan’s art seems increasingly to revolve around a particular form of invocation, even explicitly, as in his longest recorded song, “Murder Most Foul,” on *Rough and Rowdy Ways* (Columbia, 2020), which, according to critic Robert Christgau, “sums up the musical grave-robbing Dylan has been transmuting into original art for 60 years now.” Resembling a form of archival rapture, “High Water (For Charley Patton)” is best understood in this context, as storytelling as enactment, parenthetically pointing the solitary listener in the direction of Patton’s original songs, and the modes of observation and enlivening that reside therein.

Dylan’s frequent returns to the flood imaginary since the earliest beginnings of his career and up through the decades are persistent, as well as prevalent. While largely figurative in its address, the opening verse of “The Times They Are A-Changing” (1964) talks about the rising waters, and in “A Hard Rain’s a-Gonna Fall” (1963), the narrator hears “the roar of a wave that could drown the whole word.” More directly indebted to the late 1920s blues songs discussed above, in particular to “When the Levee Breaks,” is “Crash on the Levee (Down in the Flood),” first recorded with The Band in 1967 and released on *The Basement Tapes* (Columbia, 1975). Also drawing on Richard ‘Rabbit’ Brown’s “James Alley Blues” (1927), which Dylan heard in Harry Smith’s *Anthology of American Folk Music* (Folkways, 1952), the song features a narrator who seems more preoccupied with leaving behind a lover than with the material damage brought about by the flood. “If you go down in the flood,” he avows, “[i]t’s gonna be your own fault.” “Down in the Flood,” which soon became its authoritative title, remains a popular choice for a diverse array of musicians, covered by the likes of Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs on their *Changin’ Times* (Columbia, 1968), Sandy Denny on *The North Star Grassman and the Ravens* (Island, 1971), Blood Sweat &

Tears on *New Blood* (Columbia, 1972), and the Derek Trucks Band on *Already Free* (Victor Records, 2009).

The great flood returns as a topos in Dylan's post-millennial work, notably in his remarkable homage to the eponymous bluesman in "High Water (For Charley Patton)," off of *Love and Theft* (Columbia, 2001), and in his re-reading of Memphis Minnie in "The Levee's Gonna Break," from *Modern Times* (Columbia, 2006). The former, especially, embodies the kaleidoscopic tendency that Horne discusses, referencing as it does blues singers such as Big Joe Turner and place names such as Vicksburg and Kansas City, while also preserving some of the gloominess of Patton: "Thunder rolling over Clarksdale/everything is looking blue." To Lott, the author of the book from which Dylan reportedly stole his album title, it is indeed the song on the album to sound the most like nineteenth-century minstrel-show music, its "high seriousness" perhaps suggesting that "ultimate truths are rooted in cultural plunder" (168). Sean Wilentz joins Lott in this line of thinking, even arguing that Dylan in fact himself in a sense has been a minstrel, or at least worked in that tradition, in the sense that he has continued to copy other songwriters, both in their craft and in the performative aspects of their art, in the process making them his own. To Wilentz, this ongoing adaptation invites us to see Dylan as a "modern minstrel," or "a whiteface minstrel":

The hard-edged racism taken for granted by the nineteenth-century minstrel troupes is of another age, at last in Dylan's art. . . . While he has tipped his hat to the old-time minstrels, Dylan has inverted their display, as when he actually whitened his face for the Rolling Thunder Revue – turning himself into a classic European Pierrot mime, but also alluding to the old practice of 'blacking up,' in reverse. (266-7)

In "High Water," Wilentz detects echoes from both "Down in the Flood," John Lee Hooker's "Tupelo" (as it appears on *The Basement Tapes*), and "The Coo Coo," reflecting Dylan's capacity to draw on an entire trajectory of flood imagery in one single song, but importantly, as "a *style*, a long-evolving and still-evolving one, not a doctrine or an ideology" (270).

VI. The River in Reverse: Randy Newman, Allen Toussaint, and Elvis Costello. Conclusion

“What has happened down here is the wind has changed.” Perhaps what is most striking about the first few lines of Newman’s “Louisiana 1927” is the bareness and simplicity of the depiction of the monumental event it describes, its registerial tone not entirely unlike that of a weather forecast transforming into a catastrophic news report: “Clouds roll in from the north and it started to rain / rained real hard and rained for a real long time / Six feet of water in the streets of Evangeline / the river rose all day / the river rose all night / some people got lost in the flood / some people got away alright.” Description lingers on narrative, as striking images flash by, carefully chosen to carry sentiment, as well as historical weight, delicately and with economy. Soon enough, factuality is joined by implication in the song, as President Coolidge is on his way down with “a little fat man with a note-pad in his hand.” The ambiguous phraseology hints at biblical echoes and questions of race and politics. “They’re trying to wash us away,” Newman sings.

In situating his song in the context of a specific historical event, Newman’s intent is different from Dylan’s, but the vernacular he draws upon is not. A repository of poetic and musical tropes, the flood imaginary invites re-articulation for both stylistic and political ends and will continue to be reshaped by a negotiation of interests as long as there is water, poetry, and music. Rearticulated and reconfigured in the context of political critique, it most significantly remains a powerful source of commentary on ongoing events. While the title song on Elvis Costello and Allen Toussaint’s *The River in Reverse* (Verve, 2006) addresses the event of Hurricane Katrina, it situates the ensuing disillusionment caused by the lack of response from various levels of government in an historical continuum. Drawing on biblical imagery, Costello’s lyrics question the inevitability of the ways of the water, pointing to deceit and betrayal motivated by the dangerous combination of political power, greed and superstition. In his book *Water and Art*, David Clarke observes how, from the early nineteenth century onwards, water more explicitly became a subject in its own right in the visual arts. Citing *The Communist Manifesto*,

which saw the modern period as an epoch in which “all that is solid melts into air,” Clarke notes the water’s particular relevance for our era of fluidity and dissolution, in which artistic and cultural meanings in general have tended to become “more evanescent,” “more mutable and difficult to pin down” (8). Perhaps songwriting is like the visual arts not only in the way it “embraces watery dissolution,” but also in the way that it is, in the words of Clarke, “as likely to be involved in a critique of existing socioeconomic structures as in a celebration of them” (9). As vehicles of the cultural imagination, flood imaginaries thus remain a particular form of inquiry in which it is up to humans to negotiate the truth that defines their history, actions, and politics – “and it is up to humankind, from moment to unpredictable moment, to define collectively the ethical shape of its common existence” (Rodowick xiv).

Note:

¹ While the band’s failure to credit blues composers is widely known, in this case, Memphis Minnie did in fact receive a co-credit, unlike Willie Dixon for “Whole Lotta Love” (based on “You Need Love”) and Chester Burnett (Howlin’ Wolf) for “The Lemon Song” (based on “Killin’ Floor”). Both tracks are off of *Led Zeppelin II* (Atlantic, 1969), and, in each case, the band lost the lawsuit over the song. In December 1970, Led Zeppelin also recorded an early version under the name “If It Keeps on Raining,” eventually released on the deluxe edition of *Coda* (Swan Song, 2015).

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