

Of Race and Rivers: Topography and Memory in Tallahatchie County

The Mississippi Delta is what environmental historian Mikko Saikku has called an “hydraulic regime”—a bioregion in which both cultural and economic power are tied to the management of water.¹ The Delta never would have been the nerve center of the twentieth-century cotton kingdom were it not first a massive alluvial floodplain, a low-lying flatland the soil of which was made rich by the annual flooding of the Mississippi River. Every spring, David L. Cohn wrote, “when the accumulated waters of more than a million square miles of plains and hills and mountains have been gathered together, the Mississippi hurls them against the levees of the Delta” and a “river-sea composed of the gathered streams of America rushes with stupendous force through the Delta.”² No wonder locals know the Delta as, simply, “river country.”³

While flooding was the source of the Delta’s wealth, it also threatened wholesale destruction. We can gauge just how attuned the political economy of the Delta was to the threat of flooding by a litany of historical-political-aquatic facts. First, the repair of levees was a task for which slaves could be pulled from the fields against the will of the otherwise sovereign planters.⁴ Second, the Delta’s native art form—the Blues—has more songs composed about rains and floods than any other natural phenomena.⁵ Third, levee-breaking was a war strategy pursued

¹ Saikku, *This Delta, This Land*, 96, 139.

² Cohn, *God Shakes Creation*, 60. “The drainage area of the greater Mississippi covers some 1.2 million square miles, or more than 40 percent of the coterminous United States, from New York to Wyoming.” Saikku, *This Delta, This Land*, 27.

³ Percy, *Lanterns on the Levee: Recollections of a Planter’s Son*, 3.

⁴ Saikku, *This Delta, This Land*, 143.

⁵ Saikku, *This Delta, This Land*, 157. I am unsure if love is included as a “natural phenomenon.”

by both Union and Confederate armies.⁶ Finally, before the University of Mississippi became the “Rebels” in 1936, they were known simply as “the Flood”—a menacing moniker for all those who had lived in the Delta in 1927.

Given the centrality of water and its administration to the natural, cultural, and political life of the Delta, it should not be surprising that the commemorative life of the Delta also bears the imprint of its rivers and their propensity to flood. This is nowhere more true than Tallahatchie County, the site of the 1955 Emmett Till trial and, thanks to *Look* magazine and the commemorative tradition discussed in chapter 1, the supposed site of Till’s murder. Yet, as late as 2005, the commemorative landscape of Tallahatchie County remained barren. Despite the fact that people had long assumed it was the site of Till’s murder, and despite the fact that the trial was the “first great media event of the civil rights movement,” the county did not have a single built memorial to Till’s murder. (re-word “Till’s murder” - it’s just repetitive - it was already said in this sentence. “the crime” maybe?)⁷ Over the next nine years this would change dramatically. As early as 2009, locals referred to West Tallahatchie County as the “Emmett Till National

⁶ *This Delta, This Land*, 147.

⁷ Shaila Dewan, “How Photos Became Icon of Civil Rights Movement,” *New York Times*, August 28, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/28/us/how-photos-became-icon-of-civil-rights-movement.html>.

Historic Site.”⁸ By 2014, Tallahatchie County had a renovated courtroom, a “civil rights driving tour,” an Emmett Till walking trail, and at least eight roadside markers dedicated to Till’s memory.

~~In this chapter, I tell the story of the transformation of Tallahatchie County from a culture of silence to ground zero of Emmett Till commemoration. As I do so, I stress the influence of topography and, above all, the north-to-south path of the Tallahatchie River through the heart of the county. There is, I argue, a direct line of influence from the path of the Tallahatchie River, to flood control, to the largest, most organized attempt to remember Emmett Till on record. This is not to say that Till would still be uncommemorated if there were no river; it is to say, however, that the history of Till commemoration is at the same time a history of the Tallahatchie River, its management, and its cultural, political, and racial effects on the life of the county.~~

~~Scholars of memory have long been suspicious of using natural metaphors to describe the practice of commemoration. As Kirk Savage put the matter, “Public monuments do not arise as by natural law to celebrate the deserving; they are built by people with sufficient power to marshal (or impose) public consent for their creation.”⁹ Likewise, James Young argues against the tendency of monuments to “provide a naturalizing locus for memory, in which a state’s~~

⁸ “Project Completion Report (Appendix F),” Folder: Mississippi Civil Rights Historical Site Grant #2011-012, Mississippi Department of Archives & History, Jackson, Mississippi (hereafter “Project Completion Report”); Lawrence J. Pijaux Jr., “Site Visit Assessment and Recommendations for the Emmett Till Memorial Complex,” December 2, 2009, Minutes of the Emmett Till Memorial Commission, binder two (hereafter “Site Visit Assessment”).

⁹ Savage, “The Politics of Memory,” 135.

triumphs and martyrs, its ideals and founding myths are cast as naturally true as the landscape in which they stand.”¹⁰ We must not, he suggests, trust the “sustaining illusion” of memorials, that they are “indigenous, even geological outcroppings in a national landscape.”¹¹ At issue for both writers is the tendency of natural metaphors to obscure the political work of commemoration. While their warnings are well taken, the reverse lesson also applies. (Perhaps you could cut all this and replace it with an overview - a couple sentences that summarize this but don’t “prove your point” with quotations. As an academic piece, are you required to prove what you are saying? I would assume so. But as something for a more general reader this is thick stuff to wade through to get the the point. I’d say we believe you, as the author, as an authority.) At least in Tallahatchie County, cultural politics have long accomplished their most powerful work *through the mediation of the natural environment*. If not geological outcroppings, as Young feared, then hills, rivers, floods, and soils. This list of Tallahatchie County’s most prominent “natural” features are the very mechanisms through which race, politics, and commemoration mingled and, by mingling, produced the commemorative landscape as we know it. We might think of the county’s rivers, hills, and soils as **were** the transfer points through which questions of race came to influence commemoration and by which practices of commemoration evolved in ways that served the racial interests of the planter class. (This paragraph feels very academic. It all makes sense, and the argument is made well, but the general reader won’t want to read an argument for this. They will just want to be told the story have the conclusions made within the story, or after,

¹⁰ Young, *At Memory’s Edge*, 95.

¹¹ Young, *At Memory’s Edge*, 95; Young, *The Texture of Memory*, 2.

in a more natural, nuanced way, as you do later. Even as a long essay, weaving this into the story of it is better-suited toward a general audience.)

While this does not mean that Till commemoration in Tallahatchie County is “indigenous,” it does blur the line between the domains of nature and politics. If commemoration is, as Young, Savage, and so many others have stressed, a political activity, we must not conclude that it is therefore not entangled with nature. Indeed, in Tallahatchie County, the political influence of topography has been so profound that rivers and hills now register as political agents bending Till’s memory to the benefit of the white elite. Conversely, because this political work is grounded in the path of the river and the location of the hills, the county’s long history of partisan commemorative work registers as a natural outgrowth of the physical environment. In short the ecology of Tallahatchie County (its rivers, soils, and hills) provides for the ecology of memory (the entanglement of commemoration, race, and place). (repetitive - as if you’re serving up an argument for debate rather than telling us a story about this. Unless you lose other things you’ve said before (which is a good idea in some cases) you don’t need to restate this. This paragraph could be whittled down to one or two sentences.)

I tell this story in two parts. In section one, I explain how the Tallahatchie River has become an important boundary in a variety of different registers: cultural, economic, judicial, and topographical. Above all, I stress the ways in which the river aligns particular modes of racial oppression with particular landforms. The river’s history of distributing racisms-will prove key in this chapter’s long second section, a chronologically organized account of the river’s influence on commemoration. I argue that Till’s commemoration became entangled with the river (and through the river with racism) on four different occasions. First, the fact that the majority of

the jury lived east of the river has been a consistent mechanism of exonerating the Delta's planter class. Second, flood control measures led directly to the centerpiece of the county's commemorative efforts, the restoration of the Tallahatchie County Courthouse to its 1955 condition. Third, the same flood strategies that led to the courthouse, also produced the Emmett Till Memorial Commission—the most influential body of Till commemorators in the world. Fourth, while the river made possible a widely publicized “apology” on behalf of the county in 2007, it also ensured that the apology did not implicate the white elite. While the influence of the river is different in each case, (change to semicolon)all four episodes provide concrete evidence that the river is a political actor in its own right and that commemoration, while not “indigenous,” is a practice that gains force as it is invested by the natural environment. (For the general reader, you should lose these two paragraphs)

<A> Racism and the River

Because of the influence of *Look* magazine, it was widely—nearly universally—assumed that Tallahatchie County was the site of Till's murder. For this reason, the county is mentioned often and highlighted on virtually every map of the murder. But the county is rarely given any agency. It has never been more than an accidental spot on a map, or an exogenous set of spatial coordinates. There was nothing about the particularities of the county that made it important for Till's murder, and nothing about Till's murder that made the particularities of the county relevant for memory work. In this regard, the groundbreaking work of Stephen Whitaker is illustrative. Explaining the location of the trial in his oft-quoted 1963 MA thesis, he wrote of Tallahatchie County that it was little more than an intensified version of the deep south. While Mississippi

functions synecdochally for the entirety of the “deep south,” he argued, Tallahatchie County functioned synecdochally for the state of Mississippi: it is, as it were, the deepest of the “deep south.”¹²([read this before in the introduction](#)) While descriptions of Delta counties as the epitome of the deep south are extraordinarily common, such logics imply that the particularities of a given locale are relevant only insofar as they resemble the so-called “mind of the south.”¹³ In this sense, Whitaker set the tone for the first two generations of Till storytelling. Tallahatchie County is always mentioned, but it never mattered. Or, more precisely, it never mattered as anything more than [an](#) intensely southern spot.¹⁴ Most often, it was little more than the accidental location of the trial.

Yet the ecological and topographical features of Tallahatchie County have, from the very beginning, played a massive role in shaping the memory of Emmett Till. In fact, this does not put it quite strongly enough. Even if the influence of the county’s topography has seldom been acknowledged, it has played a formative role in all facets of public life from the antebellum period forwards. “From the earliest days of its settlement,” James C. Cobb writes, “the Delta’s physical environment encouraged its residents to believe they were different from other

¹² Whitaker, “A Case Study in Southern Justice,” 16.

¹³ See, for example, Cobb: the Delta is “the distilled essence of the Deep South.” Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth*, vii.

¹⁴ See, for example, Darryl Mace quoting the *New York Times* on the town of Sumner, the second county seat of Tallahatchie County: “Sumner, Mississippi . . . the county seat of Tallahatchie County, is the epitome of the way of life, the more, the racial attitudes and the racial tensions that are summoned up by the words ‘deep south.’” Mace, *In Remembrance of Emmett Till*, 104.

Mississippians.”¹⁵ On a smaller scale, the same must be said of Tallahatchie County: its natural features informed its cultural life and, at the places its cultural life was most intense, ~~there~~ the influence of the county’s topography was strongest. This was true to such an extent that the county’s most distinguishing characteristics—from race to agriculture—could hardly be talked about without invoking the topography of the county. In this regard, the most important feature of the county’s physical environment is the fact that it is not entirely within the Delta. The eastern boundary of the Mississippi Delta, marked by the Tallahatchie River and an adjacent string of bluffs, cuts Tallahatchie County in half. Thus only the western half of the county is in the Delta—the fertile floodplain of the Mississippi known for its aristocratic planters and fertile topsoil. The eastern half of the county is in an area known simply as “the hills.”

By the late nineteenth century, the Tallahatchie River was a boundary marker for the county in several different registers. Topographically, it divided the flat alluvial plains of the Delta from the rolling hills of the east. Economically, it divided the affluent cotton kingdom of Delta plantations from the small, poor farms hewed out of the hills.¹⁶ Culturally, it divided the self-styled aristocratic Delta “planters” from the lower-class “farmers” of the hills. (Yes! This is what I’ve been waiting for - the cultural geography element. I was questioning the idea of geography as a determiner of racism in ch. 1 when it was really about location more than geography.) Finally, since the opening years of the twentieth century, the river has divided the county juridically, dividing the first from the second judicial districts. All of these distinctions

¹⁵ Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth*, 124.

¹⁶ “While Mississippi has always been poor, the Delta since its development as a major agricultural center has been an enclave of prosperity for some.” Dunbar, *Delta Time*, 15.

have played identifiable roles in the commemoration of Emmett Till, but none of them have been quite as influential as the sharp distinction in racial attitudes marked by the course of the Tallahatchie River. Racially speaking, the river has divided two different styles of oppression, the paternalistic *noblesse oblige* of the Delta aristocracy and the open racism of the hills. (so important to know. This explains why including Sunflower County changes the level or type of racism.) In practice, of course, these distinctions can hardly be separated: the wealth of the Delta depends on the alluvial plains, reproduces distinctions of class, and engenders paternalism as the preferred form of racism. ~~I list them discreetly only to stress the sheer range of cultural divisions made possible by the Tallahatchie River.~~ The hills and Delta: ~~they~~ may both be in Tallahatchie