

New Stage Theatre presents



A Play with Music by **Marcus Gardley**

Directed by **Francine Thomas Reynolds** Featuring **Vasti Jackson**

**January 29-February 10, 2019**

For tickets: **601-948-3533** or **newstagetheatre.com**

Sponsored by



# Study Guide

*Marcus Gardley's Hell in High Water*

## Table of Contents

Table of Contents	Page 1
Audience Etiquette	Page 2
Discussion Questions and Classroom/Research Activity	Page 3
About the Author: Marcus Gardley	Page 4
About the Play	Page 5
Statistical Comparison of the Great Flood of 1927 and the Flood of 1993	Page 6
The Cast of Characters and Production Staff	Page 7
New Stage Theatre's Production: Scenic Design	Page 8
Costume Design and 1920's Fashion	Page 9
Director's Notes: Francine Reynolds, Artistic Director	Page 11
Quotes from Mark Twain, <i>Life on the Mississippi</i>	Page 13
A Brief History of the Levee System in Mississippi	Page 14
The Mississippi River Commission and the Army Corps of Engineers	Page 16
The Cotton Belt: The Mississippi Delta	Page 17
The Yazoo and Mississippi Valley/Illinois Central Passenger Train	Page 19
The Flood of 1927	Page 20
Life on the Levee and the American Red Cross	Page 23
Robert Moton and the Colored Advisory Commission	Page 25
The Flood's Aftermath	Page 27
About Vasti Jackson, Composer and Musical Director	Page 28
Delta Blues Music and Famous Blues Artists	Page 30
The Great Migration	Page 31
The Percys	Page 34
William Percy's speech from <i>Lanterns on the Levee</i> : Recollections of a Planter's Son	Page 37
Perspectives of the Flood and Disaster Relief	Page 38
Crossword Puzzle of The Great Flood of 1927	Page 41
Crossword Answer Key	Page 42
Further Reading and Resources	Page 43
Teacher Evaluation Form	Page 44
Student Evaluation Form	Page 45

## NEW STAGE *Theatre*

1100 Carlisle Street  
Jackson, MS. 39202  
601.948.3533, ext. 232: Sharon Miles, Education Director  
ext. 236: Drew Stark, Education Associate  
[www.newstagetheatre.com](http://www.newstagetheatre.com)



## Audience Etiquette

This performance of Marcus Gardley's *Hell in High Water* at New Stage Theatre may be some students' first theatre experience. To best prepare your students for today's performance, we ask that you review these guidelines for expected behavior of an audience as follows:

- Stay with your group at all times and pay attention to your teachers and chaperones.
- Listen to the New Stage staff member who will board your bus and escort your group to the lobby.
- Be sure to go to the bathroom before the performance begins. It is hard to leave without causing a disturbance to those around you once the performance starts.
- Make yourself comfortable while keeping movement to a minimum.
- Please do not stand up, walk around or put your feet on the seat in front of you.
- Absolutely no gum chewing, eating or drinking in the theatre.

## Noise

Live theatre creates a unique and dynamic atmosphere between actors and audience members for sharing ideas and emotional expression. In the same way that actors can hear what is happening on-stage, they can also hear disruptions in the audience as well. While actors appreciate laughter and applause at appropriate times, excessive noise and talking is not welcomed. Even whispering voices can be distracting to the actors and others in the audience.

- Do not talk during the performance.
- Cell phones are prohibited inside the theatre. Not only is the use of cell phones during a performance distracting for both the actors and fellow audience members, the cellular signal interferes with the use of our sound system. Upon entering the theatre, please remind students (and teachers) to turn off all electronic devices and store them during the performance. At the conclusion of the performance, we encourage you to like us on Facebook and other social media platforms.

## Applause

Applause respectfully acknowledges the performers and shows appreciation or audience approval. Traditionally, applause occurs before intermission and at the conclusion of a performance. Dimming the lights on the stage and bringing up the house lights generally signals these intervals. A curtain call, when the cast returns to the stage, will follow every performance. Enjoy the show!

STUDY GUIDE: Marcus Gardley's *Hell in High Water*Discussion Questions for Marcus Gardley's *Hell in High Water*

If you were given the opportunity to uproot your life and family from everything that is familiar for the promise of a better life, would you? If making a better life for yourself was possible where you currently are, would you choose to move and why?

The Great Flood of 1927 had significant impact on Mississippi, affecting its agricultural industry, social relationships, civil rights, music and literature, as well as other aspects of everyday life. Think about one of these outcomes and compare it to the effects of a modern US disaster such as Hurricane Katrina or Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico. Was the response of Mississippians in 1927 the same as they were in 2005? Why or why not? How has a federal response to disasters changed the relief effort?

Explain the environmental aspects that contributed to the rise of the flood waters of the Mississippi. What role should our government play in maintaining and preserving our environment within our own borders and with countries in rest of the world?

If you were faced with a cataclysmic disaster (i.e. flood, wildfire, tornado, hurricane) and you had the opportunity to grab three things from your home before it is destroyed, what would those items be and why?

The playwright Marcus Gardley is noted for both creating strong roles for African American women and using music as a spiritual and narrative force in his works. How does the music, created by Vasti Jackson for New Stage's production, support Gardley's narrative and add to the dramatic intensity of our production? How do the female characters in *Hell in High Water* contribute to the main conflict between father and son?

## Classroom and Research Activity

Discuss with students the types of natural disasters that are common in your area, such as floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, and forest fires.

Research other natural disasters that have affected Mississippians, such as:

- The Mississippi River Floods of 1973 and 2011
- The 1979 Easter Flood of the Pearl River
- Hurricanes Camille in 1969 and Katrina in 2005
- The Delta ice storm of 1994
- The Tupelo tornadoes of 1936, 2008, and 2014
- The Hattiesburg tornado of 2013
- The Louisville tornado of 2014

Write an informative essay or create a presentation to share with the class informing them about the circumstances of the disaster. How does it compare to the Flood of 1927?



STUDY GUIDE: Marcus Gardley's *Hell in High Water*

## About the Author: Marcus Gardley



Originally from West Oakland, California, American poet-playwright Marcus Gardley was born the son of a minister and a nurse. A self-proclaimed avid reader at an early age, he studied and wrote poetry at San Francisco State University. He later went on to complete his MFA in playwriting from the Yale Drama School. A member of New Dramatists, The Dramatists Guild, and The Lark Play Development Center, Gardley is a professor of playwriting at Brown University. He was also awarded the 2011 PEN/Laura Pels award for Mid-Career Playwright. His early influences include August Wilson, James Baldwin, and the early Harlem art scene. His most recent play, *Every Tongue Confess*, premiered at Arena Stage starring Phylicia Rashad and directed by Kenny Leon in 2010. This work was nominated for the Steinberg New Play Award, the Charles MacArthur Award and was a recipient of the Edgerton Foundation New Play Award.

*On the Levee* (now *Hell in High Water*), a play with music, premiered in 2010 at LCT3/Lincoln Center Theater and was nominated for 11 Audelco Awards including outstanding playwright.

His play, *And Jesus Moonwalks the Mississippi*, was produced at The Cutting Ball Theater in 2010 and received the SF Bay Area Theatre Critics Circle Award nomination for outstanding new play and was extended twice. He has had six plays produced including *dance of the holy ghost* at Yale Repertory Theatre (now under a Broadway option,) *(L)imitations of Life*, at the Empty Space in Seattle, and *like sun fallin' in the mouth* at the National Black Theatre Festival. He is the recipient of a Helen Merrill Award, a Kesselring Honor, the Gerbode Emerging Playwright Award, the National Alliance for Musical Theatre Award, the Eugene O'Neill Memorial Scholarship, and the ASCAP Cole Porter Award.

*I am obsessed with these stories that evolve over time. Stories in the Bible, but also Greek myth, creation stories, and how we need them in order to understand our humanity. I am also really obsessed with histories that are no longer in the popular consciousness- parts of our history that are taboo to discuss or that we just don't know, for whatever reason.*

-Marcus Gardley, 2014



Marcus Gardley's *On The Levee* at Lincoln Center in 2010.

STUDY GUIDE: Marcus Gardley's *Hell in High Water*

## About the Play

Synopsis:

Set in Greenville Mississippi, *Hell in High Water* is an epic musical play that explores the almost forgotten Mississippi flood of 1927, one of the worst natural disasters in United States history. At the heart of the story are two fathers and sons: LeRoy Percy, a white cotton farmer, and his poet-son Will, and Joe Goodin, an African-American bootblack and his son James, a self-proclaimed lady's man. The play follows the circumstances before and after the break of the levee at Mound Landing, where hundreds of thousands of people, the majority of whom are African American, are left homeless and seek higher ground on the broken levee. In the aftermath of the disaster, Joe tries to preserve his way of life while James hopes to inspire change for the black people who are confined to refugee camps, forced to rebuild and secure the broken levee.

Poorly equipped to handle such a momentous disaster, Greenville struggles how to feed, clothe, and house the citizens of Washington County in refugee camps. White women, children, and elderly are quickly evacuated. Aided by the relief efforts of the American Red Cross, refugee camps, or segregated 'tent cities' are set up to administer aid to those who remain. Charged with the task of supervising the relief efforts, Will is faced with the decision whether to evacuate Greenville's most prized possession, the African American labor force, or have them remain to assist in the recovery from this disaster. Although Will is convinced that evacuations would be the most effective method of solving their refugee crisis, many of Greenville's citizens, along with Will's father LeRoy, are only concerned with preserving the labor force in Greenville. They fear that evacuating the African Americans from the Delta, their labor force would never return to rebuild. Both young men struggle to assert their authority in the direst of circumstances and what ensues is more destructive than any flood.

Based on a true story, *Hell in High Water* illuminates a dark part of Mississippi history that challenges the enduring spirit of those left broken in a time of devastation and racial division.

Setting:

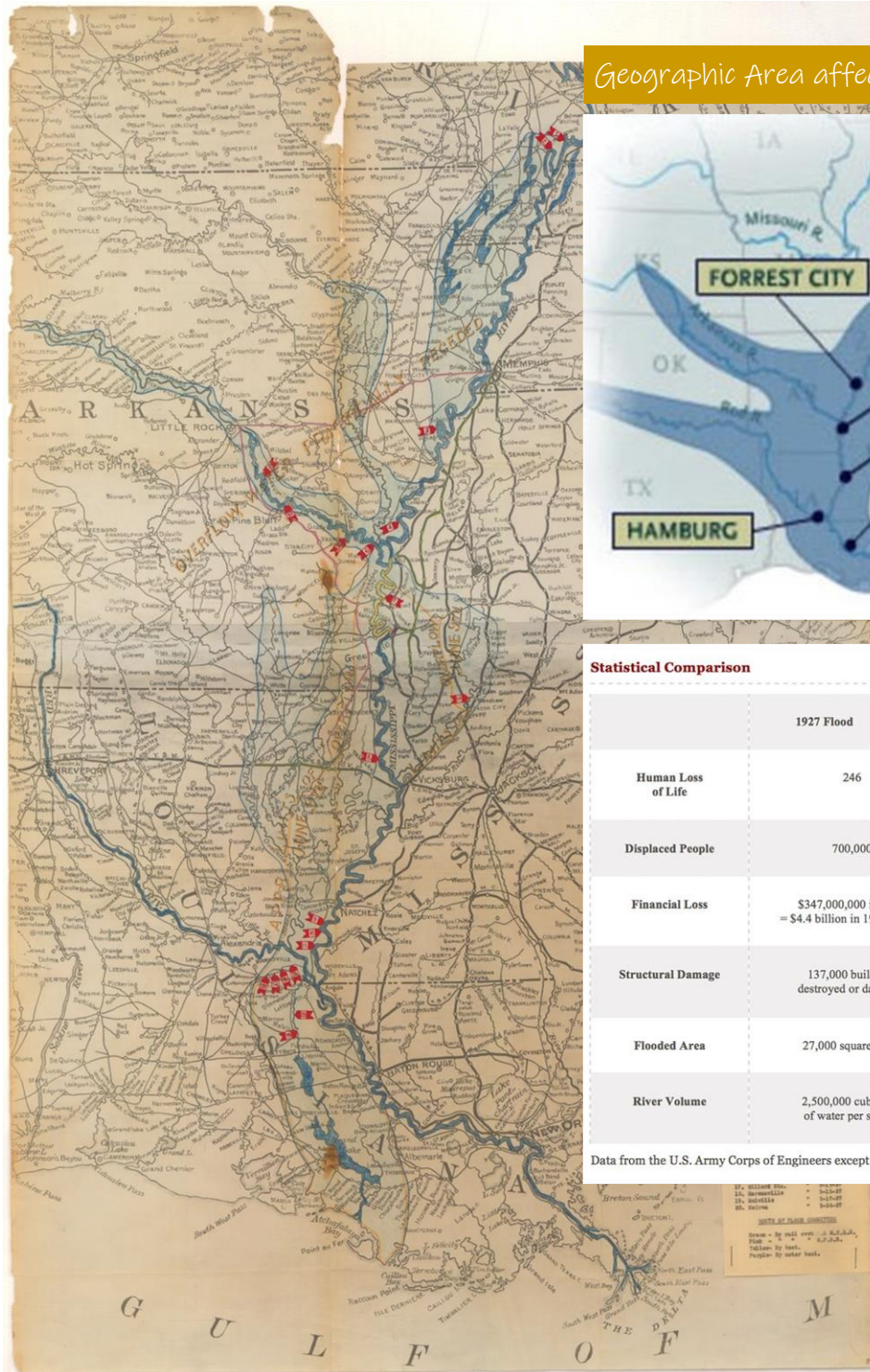
Greenville, Mississippi

Time Period:

1927	Part I:	April 15 <sup>th</sup> , 1927: Before the levee breaks
	Part II:	April 23 <sup>th</sup> , 1927: Eight days later
	Part III:	June 6 <sup>th</sup> , 1927: Forty-three days later



Statistical Comparison of The Great Flood of 1927 and the Flood of 1993



Geographic Area affected by the 1927 Flood

Statistical Comparison

	1927 Flood	1993 Flood
Human Loss of Life	246	47
Displaced People	700,000	74,000
Financial Loss	\$347,000,000 in 1927 = \$4.4 billion in 1993 dollars	\$7,500,536,000
Structural Damage	137,000 buildings destroyed or damaged	47,650 buildings destroyed or damaged
Flooded Area	27,000 square miles	15,600 square miles
River Volume	2,500,000 cubic feet of water per second	1,000,000 cubic feet of water per second (USGS)

Data from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers except where noted.

STUDY GUIDE: Marcus Gardley's *Hell in High Water*The Cast of Characters of *Hell in High Water*

OLD LUCAS/THE MISSISSIPPI	Vasti Jackson
FOREMAN	Joseph Frost
HEATHCLIFF	Hosea Griffith
BUFORD	Will Lindsey
CEPHUS	Xerron X. Mingo
FLORENCE "THE CHANTUESE"	Sarah Wade
QUEEN BLACK	Kimberly Morgan Myles*
LEROY PERCY	John Maxwell
PETULIA CROSERIE	Sarah Coleman
WILL PERCY	Cliff Miller*
L'AMOUR MASON	Hayden Schubert
CHASITY BANKS	Michaela Lin
JOE GOODIN	Beethoven Oden*
RENA "THE JUKE JOINT SINGER"	Sharon Miles
JAMES GOODIN	Jordan Williams
NANA PEARSON	Jasmine Rivera
PUDDIN' BIRDSONG	Cherry Rendel
REVEREND BOOKER	Rev. Charlton L. Johnson

\*The actor appears through the courtesy of Actors' Equity Association, the Union of Professional Actors and Stage Managers in the United States.

## Production Staff

Director – Francine Reynolds  
 Stage Manager – Elise McDonald  
 Choreographer – Tiffany Jefferson  
 Music Director – Vasti Jackson  
 Composer/Arranger – Vasti Jackson  
 Scenic Designer – Cody Stockstill  
 Costume Designer – Lesley Raybon  
 Lighting Designer – Bronwyn Teague  
 Sound Designer – Kurt Davis  
 Properties – Marie Venters  
 Technical Director – Richard Lawrence

New Stage Theatre's production of *Hell in High Water*, by Marcus Gardley, is supported, in part, with funding from the National Endowment for the Arts

Community Partners

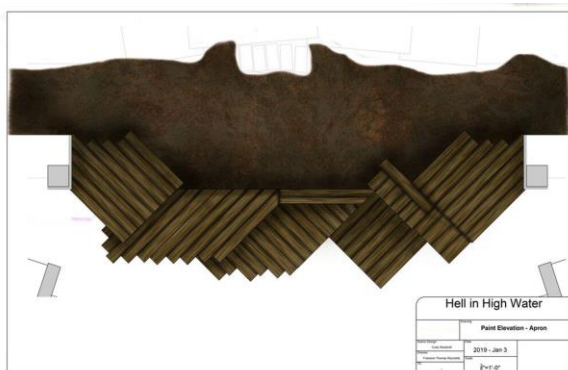
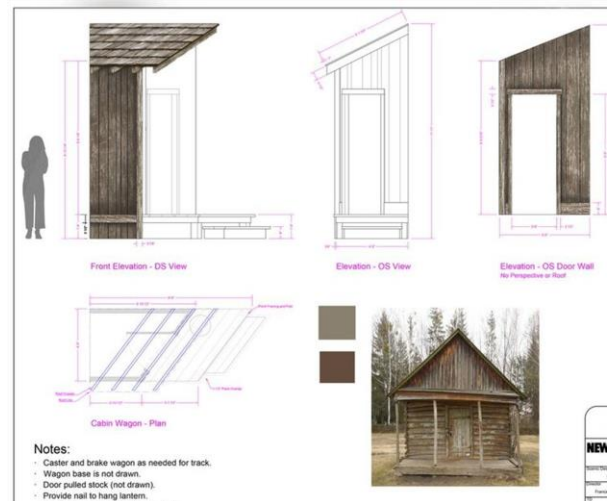
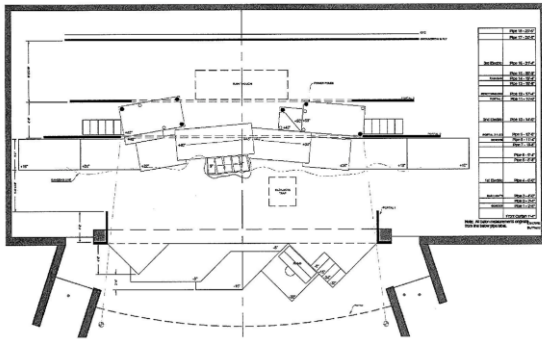
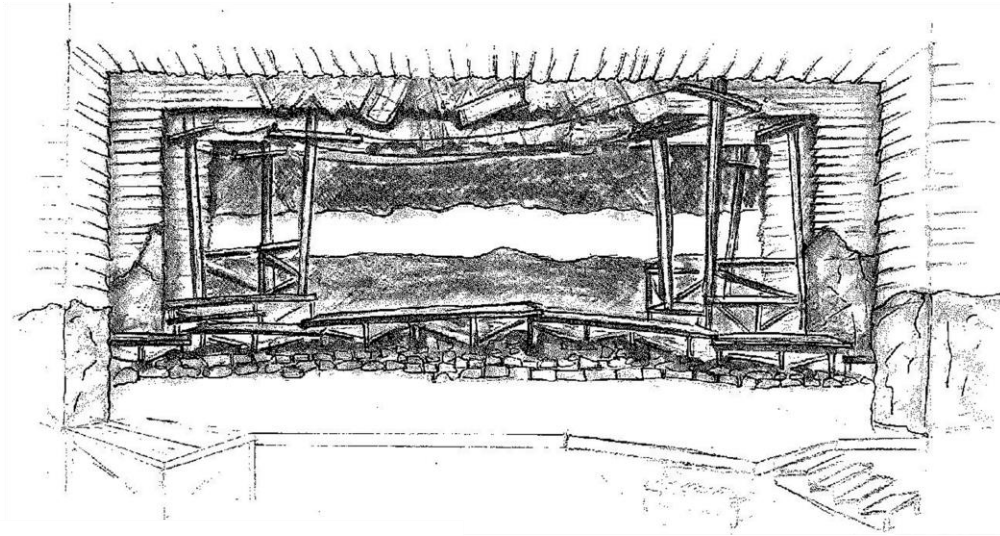
Mississippi Humanities Council  
 Margaret Walker Center at Jackson State University  
 William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation  
 Mississippi Department of Archives and History



## New Stage Theatre's Production of *Hell in High Water*

### Scenic Design by Cody Stockstill

Assistant Professor and Coordinator of Theatre in the Department of Communication at Mississippi State University; MFA in Scenic and Costume design from the University of Southern Mississippi



Clockwise from top: Sketch of original concept for Scenic Design; Design Elevations for Porch in Part II; Floor Paint Elevation (Design); Ground Plan for New Stage's *Hell in High Water*

STUDY GUIDE: Marcus Gardley's *Hell in High Water*

Costume Design by Lesley Raybon and 1920's Fashion

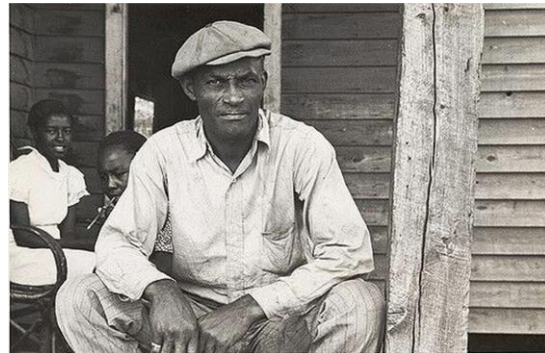
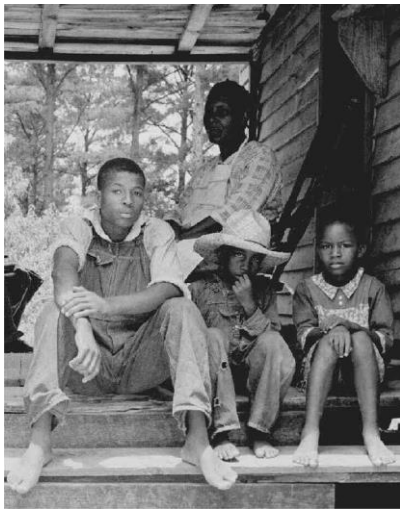
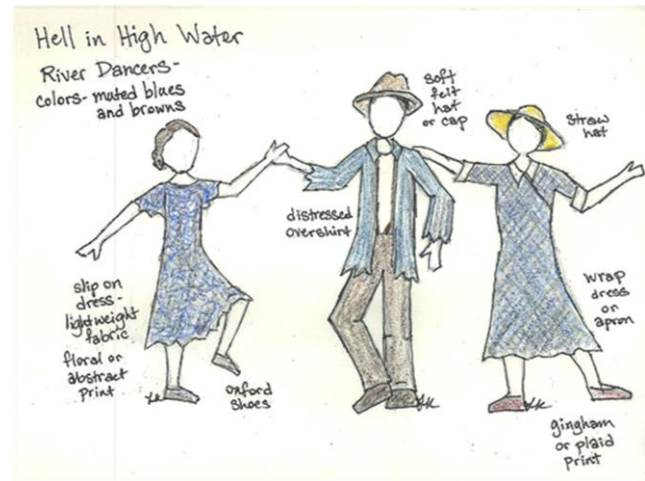
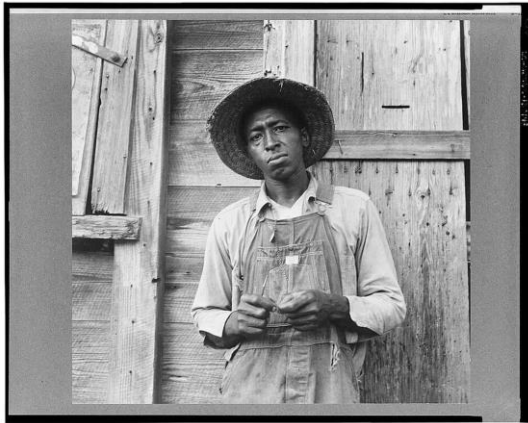
Resident Costume Designer at New Stage Theatre



Men's and Ladies' Fashion in the 1920's



NEW STAGE THEATRE EDUCATION  
STUDY GUIDE: Marcus Gardley's *Hell in High Water*



Images of African American Sharecroppers in the 1920's.  
Top: Raybon's sketch for "river" ensemble dancers

STUDY GUIDE: Marcus Gardley's *Hell in High Water*

## Director's Notes: Francine Reynolds, New Stage Artistic Director

**One Mississippi, Many Stories** is a phrase on The Museum of Mississippi History website. The description of the museum reads that it "encourages people to explore and appreciate our state's history. We present rich and complex stories that illustrate how our shared past influences our future together."

Marcus Gardley's *Hell in High Water* does the same. While working on the play, the company discovered that the often-forgotten Great Flood of 1927 revealed the true character of the citizens impacted by the disaster.

Although it fascinated me, the 1927 Flood is something I knew little about. I discovered I was not alone in this when New Stage Theatre first presented a public reading of *Hell in High Water* last season in the Mississippi Plays initiative. Since then, the Mississippi Museum of History has opened. I encourage everyone to visit the museum to see the excellent anchor exhibit about the flood and its impact on Mississippians.

Gardley's *Hell in High Water* gives us the opportunity to explore, as the Mississippi History Museum suggests, and appreciate our state's history.

"I am obsessed with these stories that evolve over time and how we need them in order to understand our humanity, says Gardley. "I am also really obsessed with histories that are no longer in the popular consciousness"

The story in our play highlights a history that seems to be no longer in our consciousness. At the heart of the story are two fathers and sons. The real characters of LeRoy and Will Percy and the fictionalized Joe and James Goodin. There was an actual James Gooden who experienced the same ending as depicted in the play. Unfortunately, we do not know much more about James Gooden. It is evident that Marcus Gardley was influenced by a variety of accounts of the flood including parts of *The Rising Tide* by John M. Barry.

In a *New York Times* review By T. H. Watkins of John M. Barry's *The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America*, Watkins wrote:

Near the end of John M. Barry's extraordinary history there is a kind of epiphany that is as dark as the gelatinous, stinking muck the Mississippi left behind after one of the most devastating floods in American history. For weeks, Will Percy of Greenville, Miss., the son of the Delta plantation owner and Southern entrepreneur-aristocrat LeRoy Percy and the future adoptive father of the writer Walker Percy, had floundered, frustrated by circumstances and his own incompetence as head of the Washington County Red Cross and chairman of a special flood relief committee. Black work gangs and their refugee families resented being held as virtual prisoners in dreadfully squalid "concentration camps" set up along miles of the Greenville levee. Water, food and medical supplies were inadequate. Percy's subordinates held him in contempt, and his equals, including his own father, undercut his authority and ignored his decisions. And now a black man had been killed by a white policeman for refusing to go back to work on levee repairs after having labored all night. The black community seemed certain to



STUDY GUIDE: Marcus Gardley's *Hell in High Water*

*explode. To prevent this, Percy, whose family prided itself on its amicable, if typically patrician, relations with black people, addressed a mass meeting of blacks and launched into a diatribe that could have spewed from the likes of Theodore Bilbo. He had "struggled and worried and done without sleep in order to help you Negroes," Percy whined. In return, he said, they had demonstrated a "sinful, shameful laziness," and because of that, "one of your race has been killed. You sit before me sour and full of hatred as if you had the right to blame anybody or judge anybody. . . I am not the murderer. That foolish young policeman is not the murderer. The murderer is you! Your hands are dripping with blood. Look into each other's face and see the shame and the fear God set on them. Down on your knees, murderers, and beg your God not to punish you as you deserve. Greenville's black people -- perhaps too numb with disbelief to react -- did not rebel, but, Mr. Barry writes, "the bond between the Percys and the blacks was broken. The Delta, the land that had once promised so much to blacks, had become, entirely and finally, the land where the blues began."*

It has been a pleasure to work with Mississippi Blues artist Vasti Jackson. His music for the production harkens back to the time around the flood.

It was not unusual for multiple issues to appear in a single song such as in "High Water Everywhere" by Mississippi bluesman Charley Patton. Written two years after the flood, Patton sings:

*Well, backwater done rose all around Sumner now, drove me down the line.  
Backwater done rose at Sumner, drove poor Charley down the line.*

As he tries to move south to Leland, Greenville, and Vicksburg to escape the flood waters he continues:

*You know I can't stay here, I'll go where it's high, boy.  
I would go to the hilly country, but they got me barred.*

This last line is a reference to the politicians and armed guards who kept African American laborers from leaving the flooded Delta. Lonnie Johnson of New Orleans repeated Patton's sentiments in "The Broken Levee Blues" of 1928 singing,

*They want me to work on the levee, I have to leave my home. They want to work me on the levee, that I have to leave my home. I was so scared the levee might break out and I may drown.  
The police say work, fight or go to jail, I say I ain't totin' no sack. Police say work, fight, or go to jail, I say I ain't totin' no sack. And I ain't building no levee, the planks is on the ground and I ain't driving no nails.*

Apart from what it revealed of human depravity, Mr. Barry says, in *Rising Tide*, the flood of 1927 changed America. It put Herbert Hoover in the White House, even while his duplicity in dealing with blacks helped begin the shift of black voters from the Republicans to the Democrats. It inspired Congress to pass a law putting responsibility for the Mississippi in Federal hands, making it easier for both Congress and the public to accept an even larger Federal presence during the New Deal years. And the pressures the flood brought to bear on the delicate racial fabric of the Deep South caused tears that are difficult to mend.

STUDY GUIDE: Marcus Gardley's *Hell in High Water*

I would like to thank the staff of the many organizations that have supported the *Hell in High Water* production and ancillary events including the Mississippi Humanities Council, the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, the Margaret Walker Center at Jackson State University and the William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation. Their time and knowledge have been invaluable.

I know from our rehearsal experience, that *Hell in High Water* not only examines our past, it also encourages conversations about our future together.

*Oh mean old levee taught me to weep and moan  
Yeah the mean old levee taught me to weep and moan  
Told me leave my baby and my happy home  
From Memphis Minnie's "When the Levee Breaks"*

Francine Reynolds

*Some information from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History*



### Quotes from Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*

*Ten thousand River Commissions, with the mines of the world at their back, cannot tame that lawless stream, cannot curb it or confine it, cannot say to it, Go here or Go there, and make it obey.*

- Mark Twain

*(If the Mississippi were a) "little European river.. it would just be a holiday job.. to wall it, and pile it, and dike it, and tame it down, and boss it around.. But this ain't that kind of a river."*

- Mark Twain

STUDY GUIDE: Marcus Gardley's *Hell in High Water*

## A Brief History of Levee System in Mississippi

The Mississippi Delta was the area most affected by the floodwaters of the Mississippi River in 1927. Native Americans told the first European explorers to expect the Mississippi River to flood every 14 years. The Delta was not considered part of the antebellum plantation elite of the 1800's, as the majority of the land consisted of wetlands, due to the traditional spring floods. Families such as the Percys sought to tame the wild nature of the Mississippi through a system of levees. The term levee originated in New Orleans after the city's founding in 1718. The word levee derives from the French word "to raise," as a levee's ridges rise higher than the channel and the surrounding floodplains. The first levees on the Mississippi were built in 1726. William Perkins, with the aid of slave labor, established one of the first and largest cotton plantations, known as Mound Plantation. In 1867 a levee at Mound Landing was erected to maintain the settlement. The fertile soil and booming cotton production brought enormous prosperity to land-owners of the Delta.

Mass cotton production and the Delta's strategic location along the river provided an ideal network of commerce and trade with not only our northern neighbors, from Memphis and beyond, but also to our south with the wealthy international port city of New Orleans. By 1858, over 1,000 miles of levees controlled the river, some reaching up to 38 feet high. Prior to 1882, Mississippi Delta planters had to rely on their own efforts to build and maintain levees. A levee is only as strong as its weakest point, as the height and construction standards have to be consistent along its length. Local residents' efforts were not always effective and, in seeking a more advanced levee system, they sought aid from the federal government.

Flood images throughout this study guide are courtesy of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History and the 1927 Flood Museum of Greenville



At top and left: Various images of The Great Flood of 1927

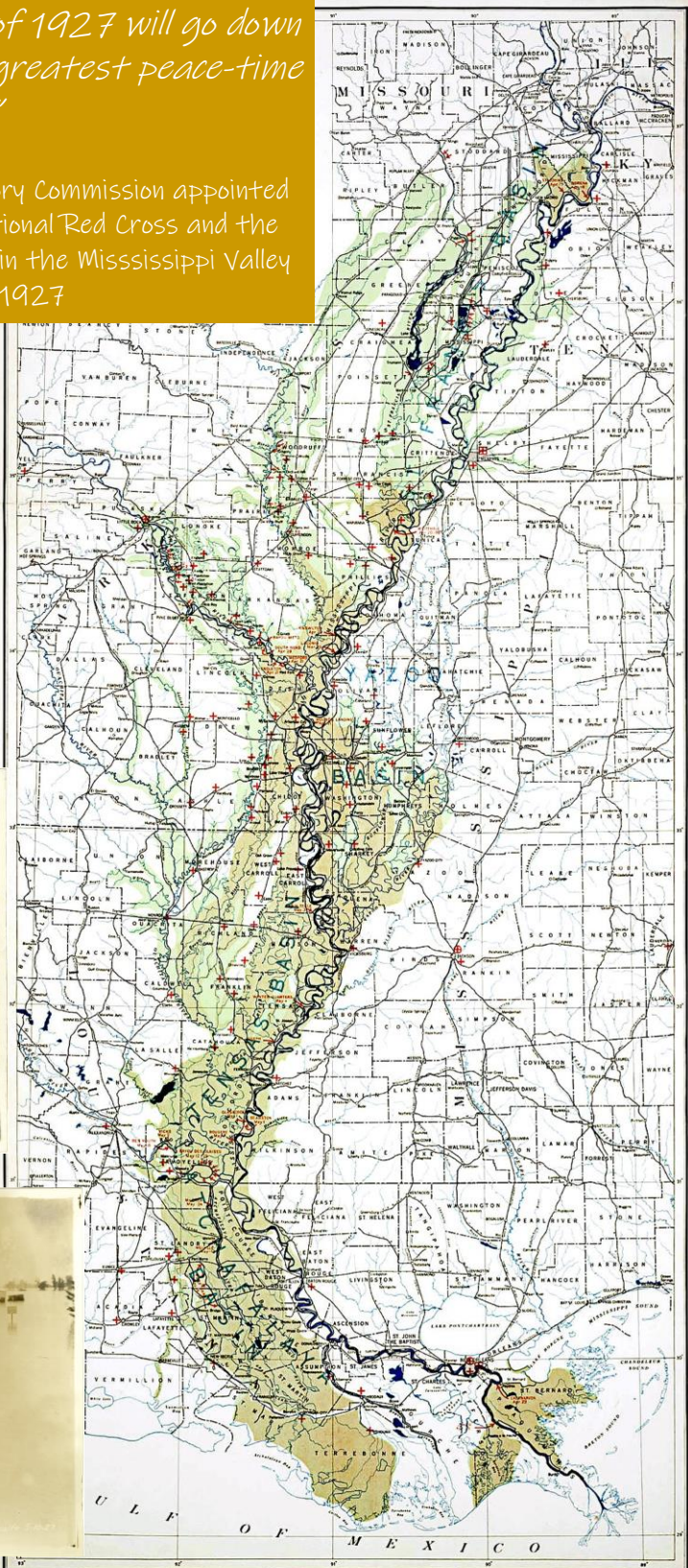


STUDY GUIDE: Marcus Gardley's *Hell in High Water*

*"The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 will go down in history as one of America's greatest peace-time disasters."*

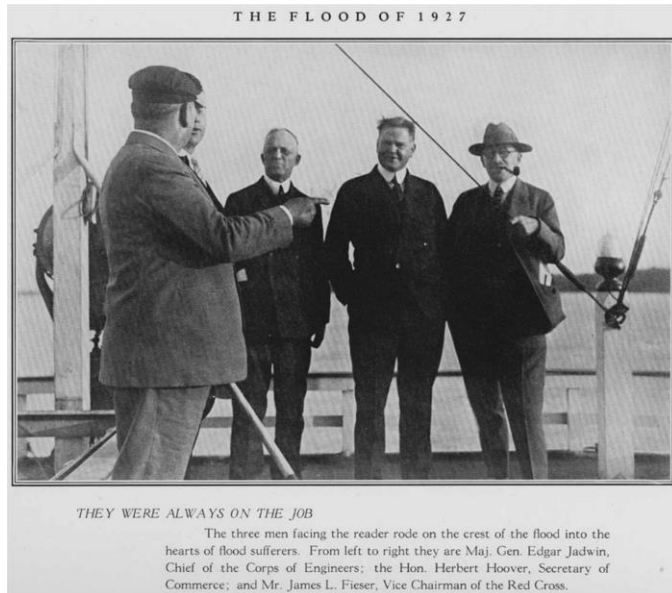
The final report of the Colored Advisory Commission appointed to cooperate with The American National Red Cross and the President's Committee on Relief Work in the Mississippi Valley Flood Disaster of 1927

The map at right shows the Mississippi River Flood of 1927 and Field of Operations of the American Red Cross. Jackson and Memphis were designated as headquarters for the relief effort. Noted with small red crosses are the refugee camps along the Mississippi river.





## The Mississippi River Commission and the Army Corps of Engineers



Not only is the Mississippi River the largest, it is perhaps one of the most important rivers in the United States. With one of the third largest drainage basins in the world, its water is vital for transportation as well as drinking water, irrigation, and industry. Today, the Mississippi levee system represents one of the largest anywhere in the world. Reaching over 3,500 miles, levees now stretch from Cape Girardeau, Missouri to New Orleans.

In 1879, Congress created the Mississippi River Commission to oversee federal funds for flood control. They authorized the Army Corps of Engineers to build levees along the Mississippi for navigational purposes from Cairo, Illinois to the Mississippi Delta. Army and civil engineers clashed over river flood and control policy. In 1885, the Mississippi River Commission adopted a "levees only" policy. They believed that by containing the river with levees, restricting the flow of water would force high water to erode out the river's bottom, deepening the river channel, enough to contain any flood event. They rejected the necessity for manmade reservoirs, outlets and cutoffs for runoff and actively sealed up the river from its many natural outlets. In turn, this produced a vicious cycle of mounting levees and with rising river water levels. Levees built at seven feet in 1850 had to be raised to as much as 38 feet. By design, levees are broad at the base and taper to a level top, where temporary embankments or sandbags can be placed. Their surface must be protected from erosion, to prevent strong waves or currents from eroding the embankment. When levees would break, the Mississippi River Commission and the Army Corp of Engineers blamed substandard building techniques. In 1926, the Army Corp of Engineers declared that the levees along the Mississippi were strong enough to contain the river and prevent any future flooding. Within a year later, the mighty waters of the Mississippi proved them wrong in one of the largest natural disasters in United States history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

STUDY GUIDE: Marcus Gardley's *Hell in High Water*

## The Cotton Belt: Mississippi Delta

Plantation agriculture dominated the Mississippi's Delta and grew a desired commodity: cotton. Cotton was labor intensive and required planting, cultivating, and picked by hand. The years following the Civil War and the emancipation of slaves throughout the South, plantation owners devised new ways to attract and retain their diminished labor force.



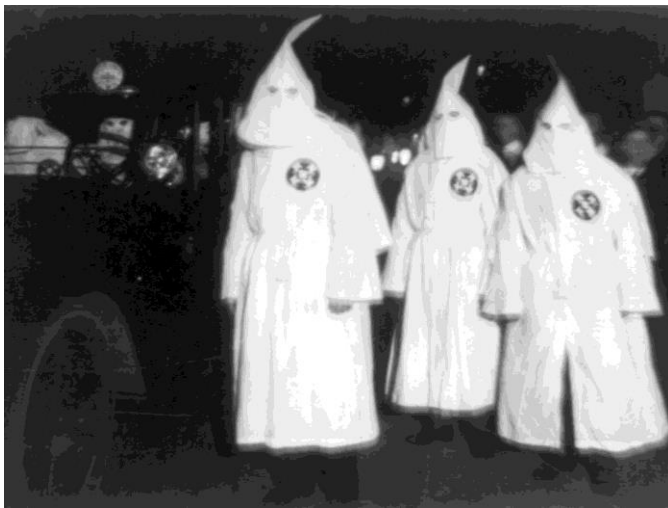
With a booming cotton economy, the Delta attracted migrants all across the South. Sharecropping, a practice where free men rent parcels of land to work, promised a decent standard of living and independence.



In theory, everyone stood to make money with a bountiful harvest. But in reality, planters exploited the tenant system to their advantage, and many sharecroppers found themselves in recurrent debt at the end of the year. Many African Americans found themselves bound once again to the wealthy landowners. With no income during the off season, croppers were forced to buy food, clothing and other necessary supplies on credit from plantation commissaries. As their debts climbed, many tenants were often forced to sell their share of the crop directly to the plantation at below market prices.

STUDY GUIDE: Marcus Gardley's *Hell in High Water*

Many cities, such as Greenville, thrived in this bustling agricultural economy. Greenville soon became known as the Queen City of the Delta. Although not a stranger to occasional flooding, Greenville had constructed an eight foot protection levee around the city in order to keep out flood waters. Families like the Percys became the epitome of the Southern elite with tremendous political and social power, and amassed large land wealth. To incentivize the working class of Italian immigrants and blacks, LeRoy Percy discouraged the establishment of the Ku Klux Klan in Greenville, whose vitriol espoused hatred for immigrants, Catholics and Jews, and blacks. Life for African Americans in the Delta was considered better than other areas of Mississippi, with the possibility for an education, a decent working wage, and opportunities for civil service. The threat of violence and lynchings loomed over all African Americans in the South, yet there were fewer lynchings in the Delta than in the rest of the state.



At Left: Images of three members of the Klan in a 1922 parade

At right: The body of George Meadows, lynched in Jefferson County, Alabama, 1889

Even in the Delta, due to Jim Crow Laws which legalized the separation of the races in public areas and in schools, justified disparities between schools. Even the importance of the harvest superseded the education of croppers and African Americans. Across the Delta, officials refused to open schools until the last of the harvest had been brought in. Some schools didn't open for the year until mid-November.

Clarksdale was another prominent Delta town, known as the Golden Buckle on the Cotton Belt. Like Greenville, it was a thriving agricultural and trading center, predominately because of large cotton plantations. Although it was located along the Mississippi River, the area was not affected by flooding of 1927 as it was located north of Mound Landing and the majority of the flood waters flooded west of the Mississippi into low-lying areas in Arkansas. Clarksdale was also a stop along the Yazoo and Mississippi Valley/Illinois Central passenger train connecting the southern areas of Mississippi to the north, primarily to Chicago.



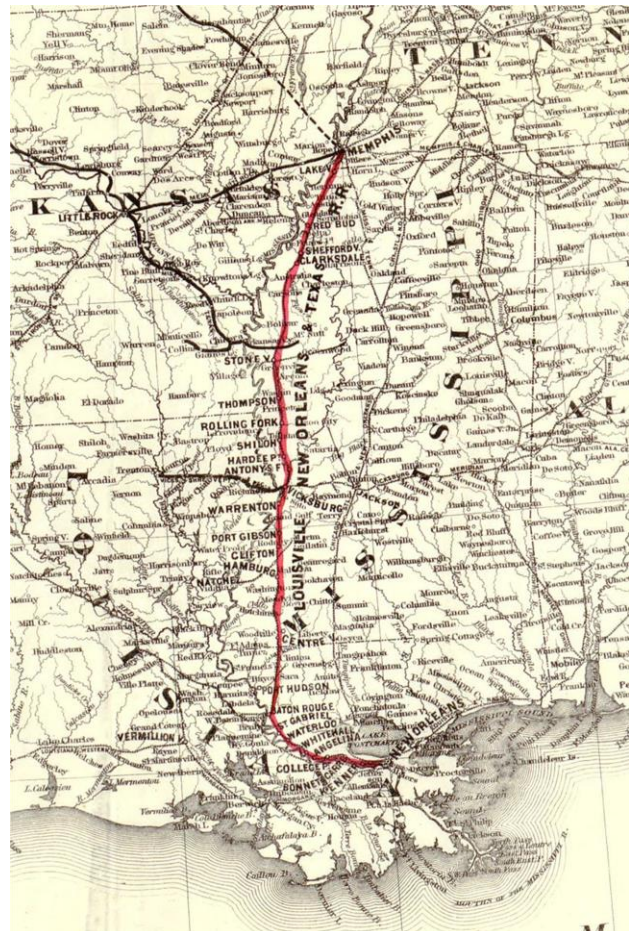
STUDY GUIDE: Marcus Gardley's *Hell in High Water*

## The Yazoo and Mississippi Valley/Illinois Central Passenger Train



Due to the devastation of the Civil War, large engineering projects that began during the Reconstruction era (1865-1877) included the establishment of a railway system to connect the South to the rest of the country. Construction began in Jackson on The Yazoo and Mississippi Valley Railroad, connecting Jackson and Yazoo City in 1882. Sections of the railway were extended between 1888 and 1890 throughout the Mississippi Delta and up to Memphis.

The Louisville, New Orleans and Texas railway was established in 1892, purchased by the Illinois Central Railroad system, and connected Memphis, Tennessee to New Orleans. What began as an attempt to revitalize the South, the railways soon became a symbol of the derisive racial politics in the 1870's. The rise of paramilitary groups such as the Red Shirts worked to suppress black voting. The election of white Democrats to the state legislature in Mississippi led to the establishment of Jim Crow Laws. The basis of Jim Crow's "separate, but equal" extended to public facilities and transportation, including coaches of interstate trains and buses. At the height of the Great Migration of African Americans to the north, many of the train depots would not issue tickets to African Americans, in order to detain them from leaving the South. The Yazoo Delta Railway is featured in a number of blues songs as the Yellow Dog Railroad, as a metaphor for taking them out of racial oppression. According to W.C. Handy, locals assigned the words 'Yellow Dog' to the letters Y.D. on the freight trains which they saw passing.







## The Flood of 1927

A combination of environmental circumstances and a poorly conceived flood control system contributed to the widespread devastation of the Mississippi Flood of 1927.

Heavy rainfall throughout the winter and spring across the entire Mississippi River Valley filled Mississippi's tributaries and inundated its watershed in the west in Oklahoma and Kansas, and east in Illinois and Kentucky. Increased industrial growth of corn and wheat, deforestation of the upper Midwest, mowing under of prairie grasses to the west, and the drainage of river wetlands for cultivation had minimized much of nature's own barrier against flood waters. Without trees, grasses, deep roots, and wetlands, the soil of the watershed could not absorb and stall the water after seasons of intense snow and rain.

The Mississippi and its swollen tributaries reach peak levels in April of 1927 and began to overflow their banks. As word of levees along the northern sections of the Mississippi begin to fail, many white people fled the city of Greenville on trains. As the train tracks became washed out, many left on steamboats south to Vicksburg and north to Memphis. As the Mississippi waters continued to rise, 450 men worked frantically through the night to secure the levee at Mound Landing.



These laborers were mostly poor whites and African Americans. In the early hours of the morning, 1500 additional men were rushed to the levee site. Guards forced African American laborers to keep filling sandbags at gunpoint, but as the water crested the levee, all the men took off as fast as they could run. As the broken levee, or crevasse, of Stops Landing gave way, many of the workers were swept away. The wall of water pushed its way across Midwest farmlands and across the Mississippi Delta, toppling trees, buildings, and everything within its path. Within days the flood covered 27,000 square miles, an area the size of Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Hampshire, and Vermont combined.

STUDY GUIDE: Marcus Gardley's *Hell in High Water*

*"No one knew how high the flood would rise. By breakfast time it had still not entered the neighborhood. We stood on the gallery and watched and waited. Then up the gutter of Percy Street we saw it gliding, like a wavering brown snake. It was swift and it made toward the river."*

*-William Percy, Lanterns on the Levee, 1941*

In some places, residential areas were submerged in thirty feet of water and even Greenville's highest point was under a foot of water. The force of the flooding waters through the broken levee equaled the force of Niagara Falls. The wall of water from the levee breach reached up to 60 miles east and 90 miles south of the river with over 10 feet of water. After five weeks, the area around Mound Landing was covered with 100 feet of water. The entire population of the county, almost 185,000 residents, were forced to evacuate, yet with storms continuing to pound the region and bring unseasonably cold temperatures, some died of exposure. Many people were stranded on rooftops or in treetops waiting for boats to find them.





STUDY GUIDE: Marcus Gardley's *Hell in High Water*

For two months, water would remain above flood stage, leaving 700,000 of people homeless. Human loss of life totaled 246. Over 137,000 buildings were destroyed or damaged, and people suffered close to \$4.4 billion in financial losses by today's standards.



### Life on the Levee and The American Red Cross



In order to alleviate the suffering of the flood's victims, the American Red Cross was dispatched all along the Mississippi River, with refugee camps, or "tent cities," to provide food, shelter, and medical care to those in need. Mississippi had approximately eighteen of those camps, which was included in approximately 154 camps along the Mississippi River.

Under Jim Crow, these camps were segregated and many argued the enormous disparity between the supplies and the treatment of African Americans in the camps. Marshall Law was issued for the black camps, housing more than 13,000 people and the National Guard was called in to maintain order and "security" of the refugees.



Many of the refugees were forced into labor to either maintain the levee or clean up after the disaster. An official government decision was made that these African Americans were necessary to help repair damaged levees and reinforce existing ones, as well as assist in recovery and clean-up activities. They were paid as little as 75 cents a day, if at all, for their labor and lived in "tent cities" on the remaining levees. These tent cities were crowded and unclean, despite the efforts of the Red Cross workers who constructed kitchens, hospitals, and schools to serve the refugees.



STUDY GUIDE: Marcus Gardley's *Hell in High Water*

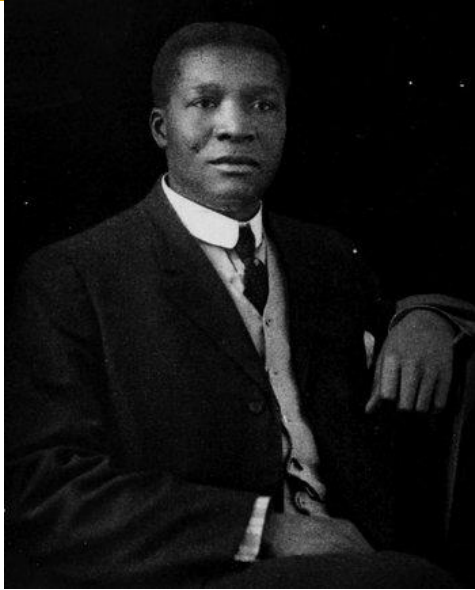
Following the flood's devastation, many African Americans chose to escape the Jim Crow South and join the subsequent migration to many northern cities, dubbed the Great Migration. Northern industrialists promised them a new life with a work opportunities in railways and factories.



After the devastation of the Flood of 1927, the Army Corps of Engineers was again tasked with controlling the mighty Mississippi. The Flood Control Act of 1928 was passed and through federal funds, the world's longest systems of levees was built. To divert excessive flow, floodways were constructed to ease the rising water as well as reservoirs on major tributaries like the Missouri River. By 1936, the Mississippi River had 29 locks and dams, hundreds of runoff channels, and 1000 miles of levees.



## Robert Moton and the Colored Advisory Commission



Robert Russa Moton was considered the most powerful African American in the country in the 1920's. He firmly believed that the best way to advance the cause of African Americans was to convince white people of black people's worth through exemplary behavior. A protégé of Booker T. Washington, Moton had succeeded him as principal of Tuskegee Institute. His power in the country stemmed from the money he could raise from whites who appreciated his conservative views and methods. When President Calvin Coolidge chose his Secretary of Commerce, Herbert Hoover, to command of all flood relief operations during the Flood of 1927, Hoover sought out Moton for help.

Despite pleas from governors and other officials in the flooded states, President Coolidge refused to visit the flooded areas. He even declined an invitation from the radio network NBC to broadcast an appeal for relief funds on an historic nationwide hookup. Hoover, who sought the Republican nomination for president in 1928, believed that this would be the perfect vehicle to raise his national profile and revive his reputation as the "Great Humanitarian." Hoover, under the direction of Moton, formed the Colored Advisory Commission to investigate the ill-treatment of African Americans in the Washington County levee camps. He, along with other prominent African Americans on the committee, presented their findings to Hoover in a report and facilitated immediate improvements to aid the flood's neediest victims.

On June 2, 1927, the Commission gathered at the Red Cross Headquarters in Memphis, Tennessee, and divided into small groups. Each group inspected the various refugee camps and the ongoing rescue work. After submitting a report of their findings, they later returned in November to observe any progress on behalf of the African American refugees. Their findings were mixed, with some conditions "highly gratifying and many which were totally unsatisfactory." They found these camps to be congested, many lacking in schools, with refugees living in deplorable conditions and who were basically helpless. The most satisfactory camp conditions were those with local African Americans assisting in the administration of affairs, such as those in Baton Rouge, Lafayette, and Natchez.

The Commission revealed the inadequacies in the distribution system of essential supplies through the Red Cross. According to Red Cross official policy, flood relief was to go directly to tenants and sharecroppers and not to the landlords. Moton believed that there was an understanding between the landowners and the local Red Cross officials and, even as a national aid organization, the Red Cross was subject to the interpretation of local whites. The treatment of black refugees was subject to the personal attitude of local men and women in charge of Red Cross affairs. In reality, black tenants had to secure their rations

STUDY GUIDE: Marcus Gardley's *Hell in High Water*

on the recommendation of their white landlord. Some landlords secured all the rations themselves and distributed them to their tenants as they saw fit. Even some landowners charged the tenants for these rations. In addition, black land owners with tenants were not able to secure supplies or rations for their tenants. On the whole, the food that black refugees received was inferior to those of whites, as many whites kept the best food for themselves. For example, when a shipment of canned peaches arrived, these rations were not distributed amongst the blacks for fear it would "spoil them."

The Commission found some black refugees in need of medical attention and their plight was immediately reported to Red Cross officials. To resist or complain about relief efforts was dangerous and Moton observed that many of these refugees were afraid of "talking too much" and that they would be killed. The Commission's findings, however, were never made public upon a strong recommendation from Hoover. Hoover implied that if he were successful in his bid for the presidency, Moton and his followers would have a more influential position in his administration, unprecedented for black Americans in our nation's history. Once elected President in 1928, Hoover ignored Robert Moton and the promises he had made to the black constituency. Moton withdrew his support for Hoover in 1932 and switched to the Democratic Party. As a result, many African Americans began to abandon the Republican Party and sought new representation in Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the Democratic Party.

The Commission was not alone in their findings. *The Chicago Defender*, an influential weekly paper read by African Americans across the nation, reported on the travesties and inefficiencies of the flood relief effort. In an article published on May 7<sup>th</sup>, 1927, they reported:

*"Men, women, and children of our group, who were conscripted, forced to leave their homes to top levees and prevent, if possible, a flood in their respective cities, are now refugees in 'Jim Crow' relief camps. This vast army of destitute persons, nearly one hundred thousand, the majority of them farmers and laborers from 75 villages and towns of seven flood-torn states of the South, are experiencing worse treatment than our forefathers did before the signing of the emancipation proclamation.*

*The victims of the flood are given very little food and are barred from all visitors. Tags bearing the name of the refugee and the owner of the plantation from which the men and women came from are being placed on them so that plantation owners can drive these workers back to the farms and charge them rations."*

Local minister, Rev. J. B. Stanton, made the following statement:

*"We will stand by you all and make conditions so that we can do our duty as men, for this as our home. Our Delta people have done their duty as men and have worked their lands to make this a good place to live and we want to stay here if you will let us and we will work with you as we have done in the past. We want to see this country come back and prosper with the same fine cooperation between the races."*



### The Flood's Aftermath

The immensity of the devastation of the 1927 flood captivated the world's attention and sparked conversations about the fate of the South. Black leaders hoped to capitalize on this attention by pointing out the archaic social system still operating there through sharecropping. Black leaders involved in the Colored Advisory Commission on the flood sought aid for the refugees, but also hoped to convince the federal government to invest enough money in the rebuilding of the South to enable black workers to become independent. Members of the black press, such as *The Chicago Defender*, sought to shed light on the plight of black flood victims and the suffering from the Southern social system and its labor practices. From their insight and personal accounts from flood victims, we learn of the disparity between the white and black refugee camps, how these "tent cities" resembled concentration camps more than refugee camps. When black sharecroppers returned to their homes, they were materially worse off than before. The few possessions they owned were washed away and to start over meant a new cycle of debt from their landlords. Of the 608,000 people who lost their homes in the Great Flood, 555,000 were black.

Between May and mid-July of 1927, seven major incidents of violence broke out across the South. Lynchings became the catalyst for instilling fear and silence among the African American community. Black refugees were "double sufferers," who attempting to save themselves, their families, and their belongings from the devastation tried to avoid being subjugated by members of their own community. A disaster of this magnitude also changed the way Americans viewed the federal government as responsible for aiding a national disaster and redefined their trust in elected officials and party politics.

Many African American writers and artists have shed light on the flood's tragedies who also witnessed the oppression that many African Americans suffered throughout their history in this country. Finding their own voice outside the South, they were free to express their feelings about segregation, sharecropping, and the Great Flood. Given a national audience, music artists such as blues singer, Bessie Smith in her song "Back Water Blues", recounts the heartbreak and despair felt by the victims of the Mississippi flood. Mississippi playwright, Richard Wright, in his works *Down by the Riverside* and *The Man Who Saw the Flood*, describe the aftermath of a flood and the effects on black sharecroppers. His "flood stories" not only appeal to the reader's sympathy for a black family who struggles with elemental problems, such as finding food and shelter, but also elicits outrage at social injustices inflicted upon them. These people not only must resist hostile forces of nature, but hostility within a racist society.

*When it thunders and lightin' And the wind begins to blow  
There's thousands of people ain't Got no place to go  
-Bessie Smith, "Back Water Blues"*

STUDY GUIDE: Marcus Gardley's *Hell in High Water*

## About Vasti Jackson, Composer and Musical Director



A multiple Grammy nominated and world renowned guitarist and vocalist, Vasti (pronounced Vast-Eye) Jackson is a powerful force in the world of music. A 2011 Mississippi Living Blues Legend Award recipient, Jackson was inducted in the Mississippi Musicians Hall of Fame in 2012 and is a recipient of the Albert King Lifetime Guitar Award in 2015. From his early beginnings in McComb, Mississippi where he spent performing in churches and juke-joints later grew into concerts, festivals, and theaters around the world. A consummate performer, Jackson is an accomplished songwriter, arranger, producer, and educator in various genres of Blues, Soul, Jazz, gospel, and world music.

His accomplishments have spanned decades, with more than forty three years as a musician. In the 1980's and early 1990's, Vasti was a session guitarist for Malaco Records (Mississippi) and Alligator Records (Chicago). He worked with gospel greats, including the Williams Brothers, The Jackson Southernaires, and Daryl Coley. In 1994, Jackson recorded on B.B. King's Grammy award winning Blues Summit. His recordings, "No Borders to the Blues", "Live In Nashville", and "Mississippi Burner" demonstrate his tremendous energy and creativity, including his talents as a singer, composer, and masterful guitarist. In 2003, Jackson composed and performed "America, Proud and Strong" with the Mississippi Symphony Orchestra and a 1,500 voice choir for the Mississippi Public Broadcasting presentation, Mississippi: The Birthplace of America's Music. Later that year, Vasti was featured in Martin Scorsese seven part documentary "THE BLUES", performing an original titled "Train Rolling Blues".

As an actor, Jackson appeared in the Lifetime Television Network film "Infidelity" that featured his composition "Casino In The Cotton Field" in 2006. In 2011, he performed the lead role in the play *Robert Johnson: The Man, The Myth, The Music* and as Hobo Bill in the stage play *Jimmie Rodgers: Americas' Blue Yodeler*. In his latest theatrical role, Vasti played the co-lead role of Ike Turner in the 2018 and 2019 international musical tour, "Simply The Best: The Tina Turner Story." Vasti was a guest artist and composer with the Memphis Symphony Orchestra presentation of Stravinsky's *A Soldier's Tale*.

He has performed for audiences all over the world in festivals and international tours including: Belgium, Japan, Germany, Lithuania, Ukraine, France, Greece, South Africa, Holland, Sweden, Poland, Uruguay, Argentina, Spain, Switzerland, Italy, Norway, Finland, England, Ireland, Tunisia, Brazil and Portugal. With *Playing For Change Foundation* "Creating Positive Change Through Music, and Arts Education," Vasti has help developed

STUDY GUIDE: Marcus Gardley's *Hell in High Water*

fifteen music schools in twelve countries with more than two thousand students. As an educator, Vasti communicates with enthusiasm, compassion, patience, and an innate ability to meet his audience and their needs. From elementary school children to adults in masters degree programs, Vasti utilizes oral history traditions, humor, vocalization, instrumental virtuosity, and interactive participation to lift the spirit, and heighten intellect through the medium of music.

A distinguished performer in the *Peace Through Music* World Tour, he has performed for the United Nations as well as football fans in Super Bowl XLVII. In July 2014, Jackson was appointed Cultural Ambassador of Mississippi. His Grammy nominated album, "The Soul of Jimmie Roberts", was released in May of 2016 and celebrates the powerful influence that blues had on the father of country music in an acoustic setting with voice and guitar.

Vasti Jackson has been featured in magazines such as *Guitar Player*, *Living Blues*, *Back To The Roots*, *Nothing But The Blues*, *Juke Blues (England)*, *Blues Revue*, *The'Sip*, *Blues Matters* and many other publications. He has performed on Dan Akroyd's House of Blues Radio Hour, the Starz Encore Network, WGN-TV in Chicago, and PBS. He has performed, written, produced, and recorded music for HBO, VH1, Mississippi Educational Television, the British Broadcasting Corp. (BBC), and radio and television programs in Australia, Uruguay, Finland, and Canada.

He is the only Mississippian to have two recordings nominated for the Grammy in the same category, with one win in the same year. Known for sweat-drenched live performances, his enthusiasm and talent captivates audiences and demonstrates the power and joy found through his music.

In New Stage's production of *Hell in High Water*, Vasti performs the role of Old Lucas and serves as composer and musical director.



[www.vastijackson.com](http://www.vastijackson.com)



STUDY GUIDE: Marcus Gardley's *Hell in High Water*

## Delta Blues Music

Blues music grew from its roots in the African American community in the Mississippi Delta into the modern Chicago blues that reached an audience well-beyond racial barriers. Predominately heard within the black community, by the 1950's and 1960's its music had developed a large audience with both white and black communities. Blues music was originally sung at rent parties, where artists would play music and pass a hat to pay the rent, or at "juke joints," where people would drink, dance, and hear music. Blues artists typically write out of their own experience and explore similar themes of the everyday man, relationships between men and women, work and travel, and a personal connection to their surroundings and events. The music is meant to be an intense type of performance, in a minimalist style, emoting a deeply personal expression of a collective feeling. Many Delta artists incorporated the Flood of 1927 into their music, using the metaphor of the flood to comment on race relations or as punishment from wickedness.

## Famous Blues Artists

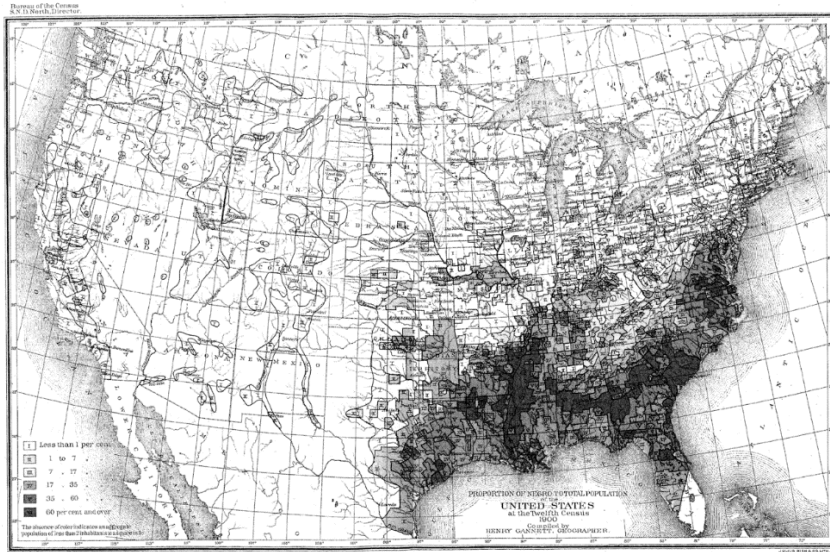


Photos of Blues Artists:  
Clockwise from top: Bessie Smith,  
Kansas Joe McCoy, Blind Lemon  
Jefferson, Charlie Patton, Lonnie  
Johnson and Memphis Minnie.



STUDY GUIDE: Marcus Gardley's *Hell in High Water*

## The Great Migration



Census Map of 1900 showing African Americans across the United States. The map illustrates the congregation of blacks within the South, particularly along the Mississippi and in the rural areas of Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina and surrounding Washington D.C..

The Great Migration was the movement of six million African Americans out of the rural South to the urban areas of the Northeast, Midwest, and West between 1916 and 1970. Prior to 1910, more than 90 percent of African Americans lived in the South and fewer than one-fifth lived in urban areas. The First Great Migration occurred between 1916 to 1940 and saw about 1.6 million people move from mostly rural areas to northern industrial cities. Historian Nicholas Lemann wrote:

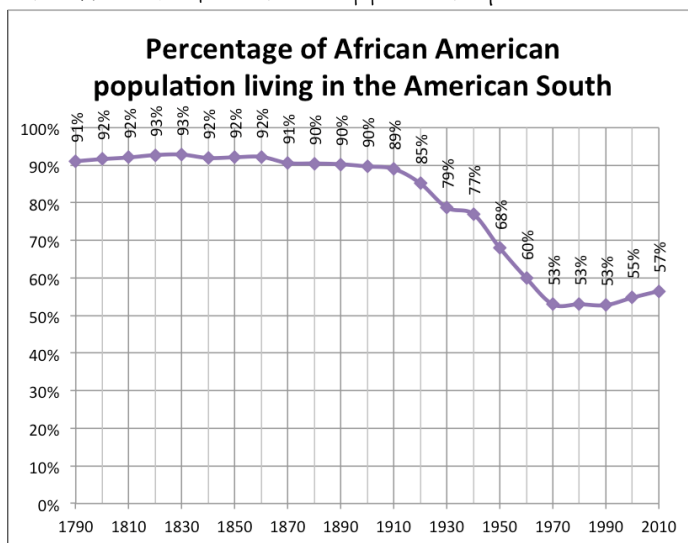
*"The Great Migration was one of the largest and most rapid mass internal movements in history- perhaps the greatest not caused by the immediate threat of execution or starvation.. For blacks, the migration meant leaving what had always been their economic and social base in America and finding a new one."*

The primary factors for migration among southern African Americans were segregation, the lack of social and economic opportunities in the South, the spread of racist ideology coupled with violence by hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, and a lack of social justice. The establishment of Jim Crow Laws was meant to disparage and demean the African American community throughout the South. Nearly 3,500 African Americans were lynched between 1882 and 1968. Although African Americans were treated with hostility and discrimination, the southern economy depended on them for their supply of cheap labor.



STUDY GUIDE: Marcus Gardley's *Hell in High Water*

Black migration picked up from the start of 1900, with 204,000 leaving within the first decade. Southern elites were first unconcerned by the migration, rationalizing their flight as a way of depleting surplus agricultural and industrial labor. As migration increased however, many argued that this would eventually bankrupt the South. For a short time, they began to rectify their poor living standards in order to coerce the black communities to stay. Later, efforts were made to restrict bus and train access for blacks, as well as divert more coverage to negative aspects of black life in the North. Intimidation and beatings were also used to terrorize blacks into submission. Local vagrancy ordinances, "work or fight" laws demanded all males be either employed or serve in the army. The outbreak of World War I and disasters such as the Great Flood of 1927 contributed to the exodus of African Americans from the South, who sought to escape oppressive racial bias and the lack of economic opportunity.



The Great Depression wiped out job opportunities in the northern industrial cities, particularly for African Americans. Sharecropping, which had dominated agriculture across the South, was slowly displaced by new farming technologies and efficient mechanization of agriculture. With the decrease in demand for cheap labor, landless black farmers were effectively forced out. Census records from 1920 show the population of African Americans in Mississippi drop from 52.2% to 45.3% in 1950.

Eight major cities attracted two-thirds of the migrants: New York and Chicago, followed by Philadelphia, St. Louis, Detroit, Pittsburgh, and Indianapolis. Almost half of those who migrated from Mississippi ended up in Chicago. Migration patterns were related to geography and transportation routes, as well as a result of chain migration, or following a path set by the previous generation. Many African Americans moved as individuals or small family groups. There was no government assistance at that time, but many northern industries, such as railroads, meatpacking, and stockyards would occasionally pay for transportation and relocation. Tens of thousands of blacks were recruited for industrial jobs, including the expansion of the Pennsylvania Railroad. Between 1910 and 1920, the number of blacks employed in industry nearly doubled from 500,000 to 901,000. African Americans were not the only ethnic group competing for such jobs. Recent European immigrants also sought new opportunities in these overcrowded urban industries, and tensions rose as they competed for jobs and housing. Fewer urban resources forced newer migrant groups to compete for the oldest and cheapest housing. Ethnic groups created



STUDY GUIDE: Marcus Gardley's *Hell in High Water*

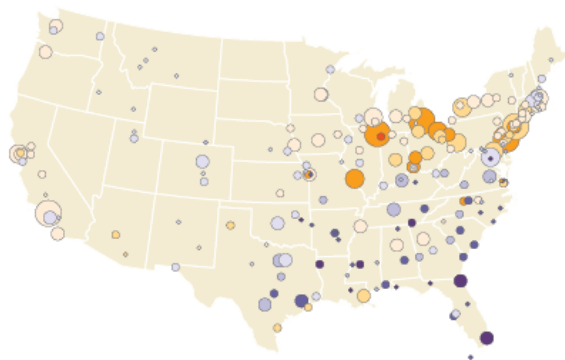
territories which they defended against change. Mortgage discrimination limited the ability to obtain a fair price of housing for many African Americans.

The first violent outbreak occurred in the late summer of 1919, known as Red Summer. The onset of World War I had created opportunities for many blacks who had taken the jobs of white men who had left to fight in Europe. As the war ended, many soldiers returned home to find their jobs taken by black men who were willing to work for a lesser wage. This violence deepened a growing racial tension in America, yet it sparked a cultural revolution within the African American community, or the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920's. Many blues singers migrated from the Mississippi Delta to Chicago to escape racial discrimination. Delta born pianist, Eddie Boyd said,

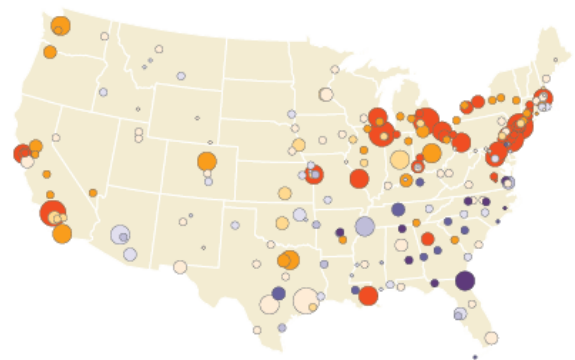
*"I thought of coming to Chicago where I could get away from some of that racism and where I would have an opportunity to, do something with my talent.. It wasn't peaches and cream (in Chicago), man, but it was a hell of a lot better than down there where I was born."*

Cities that had been virtually all white at the start of century became centers of black culture and politics. Concentrations of blacks in certain areas developed an important infrastructure of newspapers, businesses, jazz clubs, churches, and political organizations.

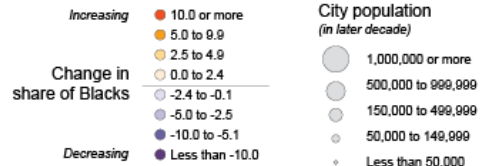
**The First Great Migration:  
1910-1940**



**The Second Great Migration:  
1940-1970**



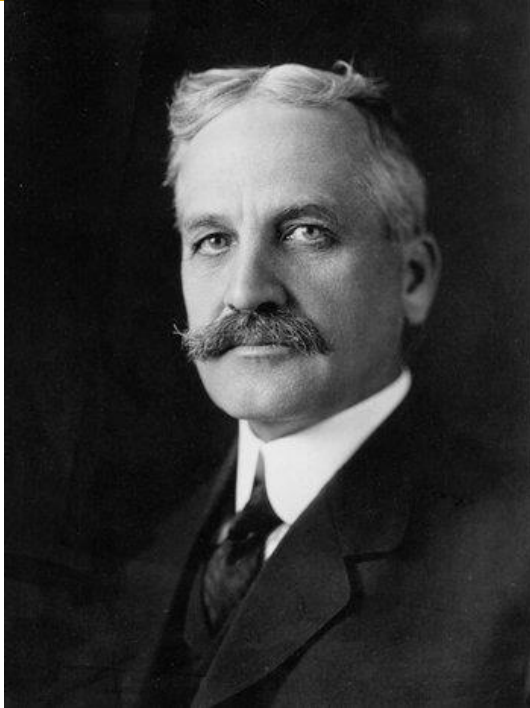
The change in share of Blacks in cities is based on the percentage point difference in the percent of population that was Black in the later time period compared to the earlier. For example, 18.3 percent of the population in Gary, IN was Black in 1940 but was just 2.3 in 1910, which represented a 16.0 percentage-point change in the share of Blacks in the city. It was the largest change in share during the First Great Migration. By the end of the Second Great Migration, Newark, NJ had realized the largest increase in Black population share, with the Black proportion of the city rising from 10.8 in 1940 to 54.2 in 1970.



A second wave began after the Great Depression (1940-1970) brought at least 5 million people to the north and to western states, like California. Since the Civil Rights Movement, a less rapid reverse migration has occurred. With economic difficulties in the Northeast and Midwestern United States, and improved racial relations, and a lower cost of living, many African Americans are returning to economic opportunities in the "New South." In 2014, African American millennials moved in the highest numbers to Texas, Georgia, Florida, North Carolina, and California.

STUDY GUIDE: Marcus Gardley's *Hell in High Water*

## The Percys



LeRoy Percy's ancestors were among the first white people to settle in the Mississippi Delta in the 1830's and 1840's and became among the South's foremost families. Born into Mississippi Delta aristocracy, LeRoy Percy received his bachelor's degree from the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee and continued his education at the University of Virginia Law School. Returning home to Greenville, Mississippi, Percy ran both his law practice and his plantations which by the early 1900s exceeded 20,000 acres. Percy's influence reached beyond the borders of Mississippi with friendships with President Theodore Roosevelt and with many major industrialists of the day. In reality, much of the success of his empire was built upon the backs of laborers in the Mississippi Delta.

African Americans, who sought a more prosperous life sought out the economic opportunities found in the Delta and through Percy's promises of favorable work conditions. As a result, conditions for his tenants were among the most favorable in Mississippi. He not only secured loans for mortgages to buy farms but assured that Washington County had some of the best schools for African Americans in the state. In 1910, Percy was appointed to fill a vacant seat in the United States Senate, the highest public office ever held by a member of the Percy family.

Outside of Washington County, racial politics and populists forces grew stronger and found a leader in the governor of Mississippi, James K. Vardaman. A public supporter of white supremacy, Vardaman won the re-election bid for Percy's Senate seat, and his supporters, including members of the Ku Klux Klan, began to permeate politics in the Delta. Percy refused to allow the Klan to take over Washington County, and for good reason. Percy's wife was Roman Catholic, his business partner was Jewish, and he employed both Italian immigrants as well as African American laborers. In 1922, while responding to a Klan speaker in the courthouse square, Senator Percy gained an ovation by defending a more benign vision of white supremacy that didn't need masks, secrecy, or violence. He defended the "religion of our community," which included Catholics and Jews. Amid death threats, Percy's stalwart opposition to the Klan decisively swayed enough voters to defeat the Klan candidates in local elections. His efforts caused such a national sensation, citing that he had single-handedly "kept the Klan out" of Greenville.

STUDY GUIDE: Marcus Gardley's *Hell in High Water*

William Alexander Percy campaigned enthusiastically for his father during his Senate race and championed his actions against the Klan saying, "The little town (Greenville) had come through, righteousness had prevailed, and we had fought the good fight and for once had won." A self-described poet, William, or Will, believed that Greenville was too much of his father's world and lacked the vision and depth of artistic growth. He believed Greenville was too busy for art and too concerned with daily living. Greenville was a place with real problems that could and should be addressed by strong men with practical minds.



*"Poets are always needed but it takes an effort to realize it, while it takes no effort to see the good a practical man with a passion for righteousness could do here I'm the right man in the wrong place."*  
-William Alexander Percy, diary entry

Although Will attended Harvard Law School, he later served as a relief worker in German-occupied Belgium. In 1917, when the United States entered the First World War, he joined the army. Will witnessed firsthand much of the grim and brutal realities of the First World War, describing them in letters from the battlefields in France to his parents back home. Upon returning home to Greenville after the war, Will resumed his interest in literature and travel. Throughout his life, Will struggled with depression, loneliness, and physical sickness, yet remained incredibly loyal to his parents and his familial obligations. Will's latent homosexuality or sexual 'free-thinking' was never discussed openly in public, even though evidence exists from his diary an encounter with a male traveler in his early manhood. His father, and even journalists of the day noted his gender nonconformity, describing Will as "a bit effeminate", "a sissy", and "a dreamer", yet fell short of speaking more explicitly about his sexuality.

When the Mississippi floodwaters broke through the Greenville levee, Will was commissioned by the Red Cross to preside over flood relief for the desperate citizens of Greenville. Known for his work in Belgium, Will struggled to adapt himself to this community leadership role. Greenville was ill-prepared to manage a crisis of this magnitude. He found himself charged with rescuing, housing, and feeding sixty thousand people and thirty thousand livestock. He quickly evacuated white women, children, and the elderly, and



STUDY GUIDE: Marcus Gardley's *Hell in High Water*

had planned to evacuate the African American refugees, but the elder Percy quietly persuaded the relief oversight committee to countermand his orders, arguing that it was in the community's best interest to not evacuate their black laborers.

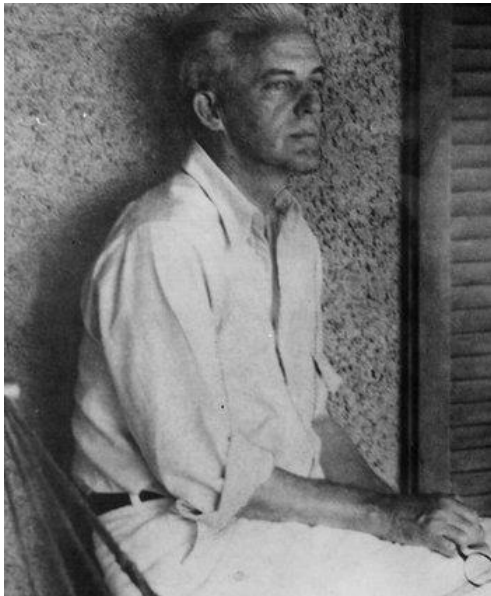
In his memoirs, Will wrote:

*"After Father's death I discovered that between the time of our conversation and the committee meeting (LeRoy) had seen each committeeman separately and had persuaded him that it was best not to send the Negroes to Vicksburg. He knew that the dispersal of our labor was a larger evil to the Delta than a flood."*

Highly criticized by *The Chicago Defender*, Will defends himself and his actions in his memoir, *Lanterns on the Levee* stating,

*"It was a general rule of the Red Cross that recipients of its bounty should unload it gratis. This meant in our instance that meal, flour, meat, sugar, and tobacco, ninety-five percent of which went to the Negroes, must be unloaded by them without pay. It became increasingly difficult to collect an unloading crew. If there was no such crew waiting, the steamer would immediately proceed with its sacred cargo to some more interested port."*

When police were sent to round up the required number of workers, a man by the name of James Gooden was shot in the back by local police. Many in the black community blamed Will as responsible for the death. In a now famous speech addressing the black community, Will chastised the black community for not working hard enough to secure their own rations and to rebuild their community.



*"To live habitually as a superior among inferiors, be the superiority intellectual or economic, is a temptation to dishonesty and hubris, inevitably deteriorating. To live among a people whom, because of their needs, one must in common decency protect and defend is a bore burden in a world where one's own troubles are about all any life can shoulder.. yet such living is the fate of the white man in the South."*

- William Alexander Percy, *Lanterns on the Levee: Recollections of a Planter's Son*

STUDY GUIDE: Marcus Gardley's *Hell in High Water*

William Percy's speech from his 1941 memoir, *Lanterns on the Levee: Recollections of a Planter's Son*:



*"I knew there was no chance here to appeal to reason. Retreat was out of the question. Attack was imperative. Unapplauded, I mounted the pulpit and spoke slowly and bitterly:*

*A good Negro has been killed by a white policeman. Every white man in town regrets this from his heart and is ashamed. The policeman is in jail and will be tried. I look into your faces and see anger and hatred. You think I am the murderer. The murderer should be punished. I will tell you who he is..*

*For months we Delta people have been suffering together, black and white alike. God did not distinguish between us. He struck us all to our knees. He spared no one.. For four months I have struggled and worried and done without sleep in order to help you Negroes. Every white man in this town has done the same thing. We served you with our money and our brains and our strength and, for all that we did, no one of us received one penny. We white people could have left you to shift for yourselves. Instead we stayed with you and worked for you, day and night. During all this time you Negroes did nothing, nothing for yourselves or for us. You were asked to do only one thing, a little thing. The Red Cross asked you to unload the food it was giving you, the food without which you would have starved. And you refused. Because of your sinful, shameful laziness, because you refused to work on your own behalf unless you were paid, one of your race has been killed. You sit before me sour and full of hatred as if you had a right to blame anybody or to judge anybody. You think you want avenging justice, but you don't; that is the last thing in the world you want. I am not the murderer. Mr. Davis is not the murderer. That foolish young policeman is not the murderer. The murderer is you!"*

STUDY GUIDE: Marcus Gardley's *Hell in High Water*

## Perspectives of the Flood and Disaster Relief

Compare and analyze the following source materials about flood relief during the Great Flood of 1927. Explain how in describing the same historical event, a change in author can present and illustrate vastly different historical accounts to his/her readers. Select a passage from one of following sections and argue its validity from your perspective.

Excerpt from *The Mississippi Flood of 1927*, June 1927 edition of *Women's Press*

By Lucy Somerville

The refugee camp on the levee, at first a miserable and distressing mass of humanity, in a remarkably short time became neat, orderly and rather happy on the whole. Tents were secured, sacks had been the only covering the first few nights. Lawyers, ministers, bankers, business men of every class and kind, with negro refugees and the national guard, pitched and floored tents, built bunks and kitchens, cooked and slaved as do soldiers in a war, and many are still working, for there are 5000 in the camp now and more to come as camps elsewhere are closed.

The Red Cross came promptly, it was already functioning in Arkansas, and has fed and clothed the refugees and many of the people who stayed in churches, attics, stores, anywhere they could perch above the water. The camp extends for about six miles along the sloping side of the levee, there are six kitchens, a milk depot, three first-aid stations, and emergency hospital for the negroes and one for white people (the local hospitals kept open the entire time.)

A tent has been set aside for a school for the white children and one for the negroes, and two tents for sewing, with an instructor and several sewing machines so that the refugees can repair and remodel clothes given them. Typhoid 'shots' have been given all the refugees and most of the people in the flooded territory and every precaution is being taken, and so far, successfully, against disease. Negro preachers in the camp hold services occasionally. Noah and the flood are favorite subjects for the sermons and the sound of the spirituals across the water adds pathos and picturesqueness to an otherwise drab scene.

Excerpt from *Black Oppression and the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927*, April 2006, *Workers Vanguard*

The federal government didn't contribute a dime of direct aid to the thousands of flood victims, despite record budget surplus. The Red Cross established racially segregated camps in the flood zones. Black families lived in floorless tents in the mud without cots, chairs or utensils, eating inferior rationed food. Sometimes forced to work on the levees without pay, black men had to wear tags identifying that they were laborers in order to receive rations, and to show which plantation they "belonged to." Women with no working husband did not get supplies unless they had a letter from a white man.



STUDY GUIDE: Marcus Gardley's *Hell in High Water*

Policing the camps, the National Guard supervised the workers, whipping and beating the men. At least one black woman was gang-raped and killed by Guardsmen. Typhoid, measles, mumps, malaria, and venereal diseases ran rampant among destitute tenant farmers and mill workers already weakened from illnesses endemic to poverty, such as tuberculosis and pellagra. The *Chicago Defender* (4 June 1927) even reported that "those who die are cut open, filled with sand, then tossed into the Mississippi River." Such horrors were stark proof that the poisonous legacy of chattel slavery still infected the land some 60 years after the Civil War.

Robert Moton and the Colored Advisory Commission Second Report to Herbert Hoover, Chairman of The President's Mississippi Flood Committee, December 1927

We found some conditions which were highly gratifying and many which were totally unsatisfactory. The Mississippi flood in its relationship to human life affected the Negro chiefly. A number of the counties along the Mississippi River and in the Delta district of Mississippi, Louisiana and Arkansas had more than 75% of Negro population. The problem faced was that of dealing with Negro life as we found it there. Not only was there congestion, but we found a class of people who were lacking in schools, who were living in homes scarcely worthy of the name, who existed in unhealthy conditions under an economic status unsound and unfair. It was impossible for such a people to develop a reserve sufficient to deal with an emergency so great as the flood because they were practically helpless, without initiative and with little self-control and self-reliance.

The national Red Cross laid down a program for the application of relief and the distribution of supplies which was totally just and fair. In all the states, however, we found that supplies were being given out irregularly through landlords and plantation commissaries. The common practices which had grown up in the communities and the local Red Cross officials, adjusted as they were to the plantation system, frequently nullified the intentions and program of the national Red Cross.

From William Percy's memoirs, "Lanterns on the Levee, Recollections of a Planter's Son"

Our kindly old Mayor had appointed me chairman of the Flood Relief Committee and the local Red Cross. I found myself charged with the rescuing, housing, and feeding of sixty thousand human beings and thirty thousand head of stock. To assist me in the task I had a fine committee and Father's blessing, but no money, no boats, no tents, no food...

Our first acts, though in defiance of all law, were effective: we seized and manned all privately owned motor boat, skiffs, pleasure craft, wagons, and trucks.. we confiscated all stocks of food and feed stuff in the local stores.. However, for the indefinite future our need of money, tents, and motor boats was desperate. We sent out a nation-wide appeal. The response was immediate and on a grand scale.

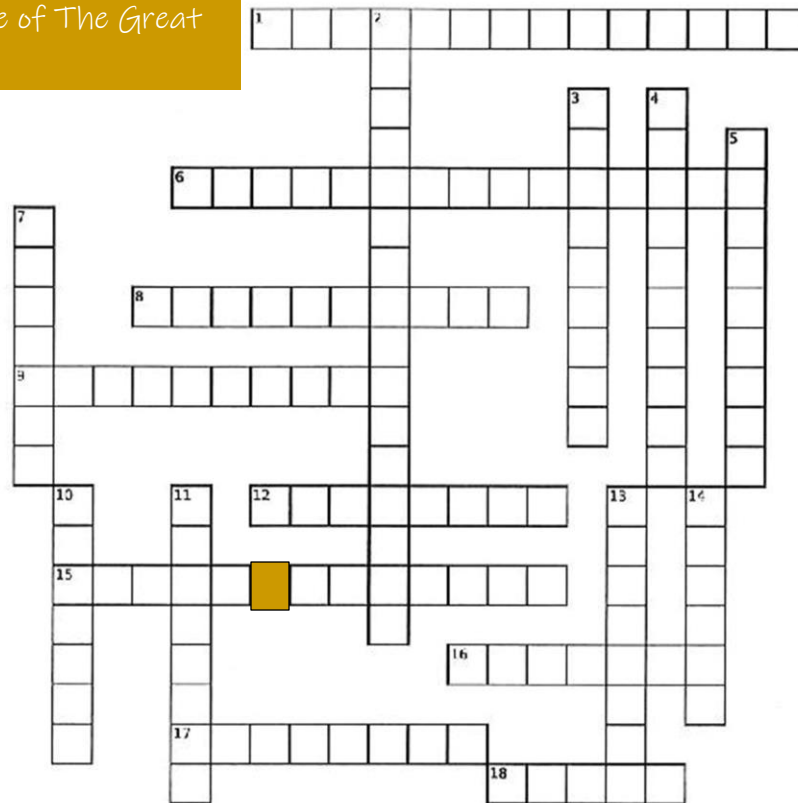
STUDY GUIDE: Marcus Gardley's *Hell in High Water*

Perhaps these early accomplishments of ours sound routine and inevitable, but in fact they taxed our ingenuity, our strength, and our judgement. At headquarters we slept three or four hours a night and, when not sleeping, lived in bedlam. It fell to my lot as chairman to make hundreds of decisions each day and the impossibility of investigation or second thought made every decision a snap judgement..

What should we do with the Negroes: evacuate them in the same manner or feed them from centralized kitchens as the Belgians had been fed (in World War I)? There were seventy-five hundred of them. It was raining and unseasonably cold. They were clammy and hungry, finding shelter anywhere, sleeping on any floor, piled pell-mell in oil mills or squatting miserably on the windy levee. The levee itself was the only dry spot where they could be assembled or where tents by way of shelter could be set up for them. In spite of our repeated and frantic efforts we had been unable to procure a single tent. We feared disease and epidemics. Obviously for them, too, evacuation was the only solution.

.. The Negro Press of the North, led by the Chicago Defender, started an eight weeks' campaign of vilification directed at me.. I had to take lightly their accusations that I had dumped the town's sewage into the Negro residential section while the white folks were playing golf at the Country Club, and they were easy to take lightly because the golf-links at the moment were still four feet under water and the town sewerage system never ceased to function. I was even rather thrilled when the Chicago Defender climaxed an eloquent editorial by observing that until the South rid itself of its William Alexander Percys it would be no fit place for a Negro to live. But I ought to have been.. pained.. by these libels, because the Negroes at home read their Northern newspapers trustingly and believed them far more piously than the evidence before their own eyes.

Crossword Puzzle of The Great Flood of 1927



**Across**

- 1 period of time when hundreds of thousands of African Americans moved North (2 Words)
- 6 act stating the government would provide flood control along the Mississippi River (3 Words)
- 8 warning from the National Weather Service for areas where floods may occur within 48 hours (2 Words)
- 9 the largest town in the Delta
- 12 international organization that gives aid during wars and disasters (2 Words)
- 15 where the levee broke (2 Words)
- 16 a popular destination for African Americans
- 17 type of Mississippi music (2 Words)
- 18 an embankment that prevents flooding

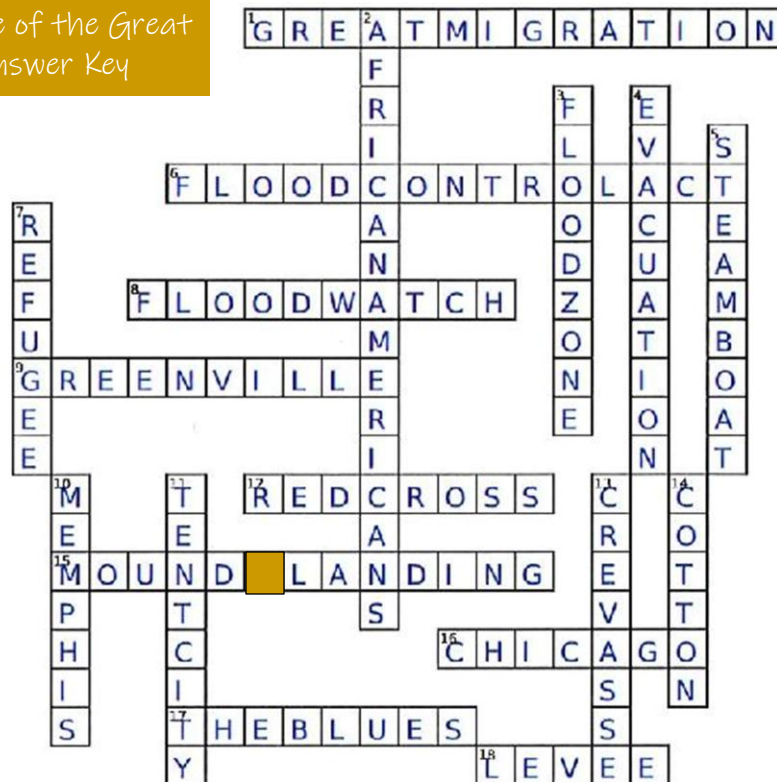
**Down**

- 2 a large population that was not evacuated from the flood zone (2 Words)
- 3 27,000 square miles of land and 7 states (2 Words)
- 4 the removal of things or people from a dangerous area
- 5 transportation used to evacuate Mississippians before the flood
- 7 one who flees a dangerous area
- 10 the city north of Mississippi that many refugees fled to
- 11 refugee camp on the levees (2 Words)
- 13 a breach or hole in a levee
- 14 the main crop of the Delta

Courtesy of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, 2014



Crossword Puzzle of the Great  
Flood of 1927: Answer Key

**Across**

- 1 period of time when hundreds of thousands of African Americans moved North (2 Words)
- 6 act stating the government would provide flood control along the Mississippi River (3 Words)
- 8 warning from the National Weather Service for areas where floods may occur within 48 hours (2 Words)
- 9 the largest town in the Delta (2 Words)
- 12 international organization that gives aid during wars and disasters (2 Words)
- 15 where the levee broke (2 Words)
- 16 a popular destination for African Americans
- 17 type of Mississippi music (2 Words)
- 18 an embankment that prevents flooding

**Down**

- 2 a large population that was not evacuated from the flood zone (2 Words)
- 3 27,000 square miles of land and 7 states (2 Words)
- 4 the removal of things or people from a dangerous area
- 5 transportation used to evacuate Mississippians before the flood
- 7 one who flees a dangerous area
- 10 the city north of Mississippi that many refugees fled to
- 11 refugee camp on the levees (2 Words)
- 13 a breach or hole in a levee
- 14 the main crop of the Delta

## Further Reading and Resources

- ❖ *The Great Flood of 1927*, Mississippi Department of Archives and History
- ❖ *Richard Wright's flood stories and the great Mississippi River flood of 1927: social and historical backgrounds*. William Howard, *The Southern Literary Journal*, 1984
- ❖ PBS News Hour: *As Mississippi Rises, Historian Discusses 'Great Flood' of 1927*
- ❖ PBS.org: *The American Experience: Fatal Flood Series* and all related articles
- ❖ *Black Oppression and the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927*, *Workers Vanguard*, 2006
- ❖ *The Mississippi Flood of 1927*, *Women's Press*, June 1927, *Mississippi History Now* by Lucy Somerville
- ❖ *Man vs. Nature: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927*, Stephen Ambrose and Douglas Brinkley
- ❖ *Gone with the Flood: A Hidden Family Narrative* by William A. Percy III, 2013
- ❖ *The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 Laid Bare the Divide Between the North and the South*, Susan Parrish, *smithsonian.com*, 2017
- ❖ *Playwright Marcus Gardley Weaves Poetry, History Together to Create His Masterpieces*. Kerry Reid. *American Theatre*, 2014.
- ❖ *The World that Uncle Will Percy Made*. Rob Dreher, *The American Conservative*, 2014.
- ❖ *Will Percy's Secret*. Mark Tooley, *The Weekly Standard*, 2013.
- ❖ *William Alexander Percy: The Curious Life of a Mississippi Planter and Sexual Freethinker*. Benjamin Wise., 2012.
- ❖ *Rising Tide* by John Barry. 1997.
- ❖ *Lanterns on the Levee: Recollections of a Planter's Son*. By William Alexander Percy, 1941.

The Flood on Film:

*The River*. Produced by Farm Security Administration, 1937. 32 Minutes. Grades 6-12

*Mississippi River Out of Control*. Produced by A & E Television Networks, 2008. 50 minutes. Grades 6-12

*Fatal Flood*. Produced by WGBH Boston and the Public Broadcasting System, 2001. 60 minutes. Grades 6-12

STUDY GUIDE: Marcus Gardley's *Hell in High Water*Teacher Evaluation Form for Marcus Gardley's *Hell in High Water*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ School: \_\_\_\_\_

What is your overall reaction to the production?

How do you feel about the production values of the performance (costumes, set, performers, etc.)?

How did your students react to the production?

Please comment on the educational value of the program.

What is your overall reaction to the question and answer (talk-back) session?

How did you hear about New Stage's production of *Hell in High Water*?

Before seeing this production, had you heard of the Great Flood of 1927? How important is this story to tell for Mississippians of today?

How did you feel about the playwright Marcus Gardley's use of language, in both poetry and dialogue?

Musical director, Vasti Jackson, composed original music for our New Stage production. In what ways do you feel the music enhanced the dramatic action of the story.

We want to hear from you and your students! Please help us by sharing your thoughts with us.

Please return this form with any additional comments to:

Sharon Miles, Education Director - New Stage Theatre

1100 Carlisle Street, Jackson, MS 39202 or email at [smiles@newstagetheatre.com](mailto:smiles@newstagetheatre.com)



STUDY GUIDE: Marcus Gardley's *Hell in High Water*Student Evaluation Form for Marcus Gardley's *Hell in High Water*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ School: \_\_\_\_\_

What was your overall reaction to the play?

What was your reaction to the production values of the play (costumes, scenery, acting, etc.)?

What was your favorite part of the play?

Did you learn anything from this production? If so, what?

What other stories would you enjoy seeing staged by live actors?

Before seeing this production, had you heard about the Great Flood of 1927? How important is this story to tell for Mississippians of today?

How did you feel about the playwright Marcus Gardley's use of language, in both poetry and dialogue?

Musical director, Vasti Jackson, composed original music for our New Stage production. In what ways do you feel the music enhanced the dramatic action of the story.

Other comments and observations:

Please return this form with any additional comments to:

Sharon Miles, Education Director - New Stage Theatre

1100 Carlisle Street, Jackson, MS 39202 or email at [smiles@newstagetheatre.com](mailto:smiles@newstagetheatre.com)