

The background of the cover is a blue-toned, abstract illustration. It features silhouettes of people and trees, suggesting a community gathered by a river. The style is graphic and layered, with various shades of blue and black. The text is overlaid on semi-transparent dark blue horizontal bands.

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WATER & ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

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IN REVIEW

STORYING PINHOOK: REPRESENTING THE COMMUNITY, THE FLOODS, AND THE STRUGGLE

By Lisa Marie Brimmer

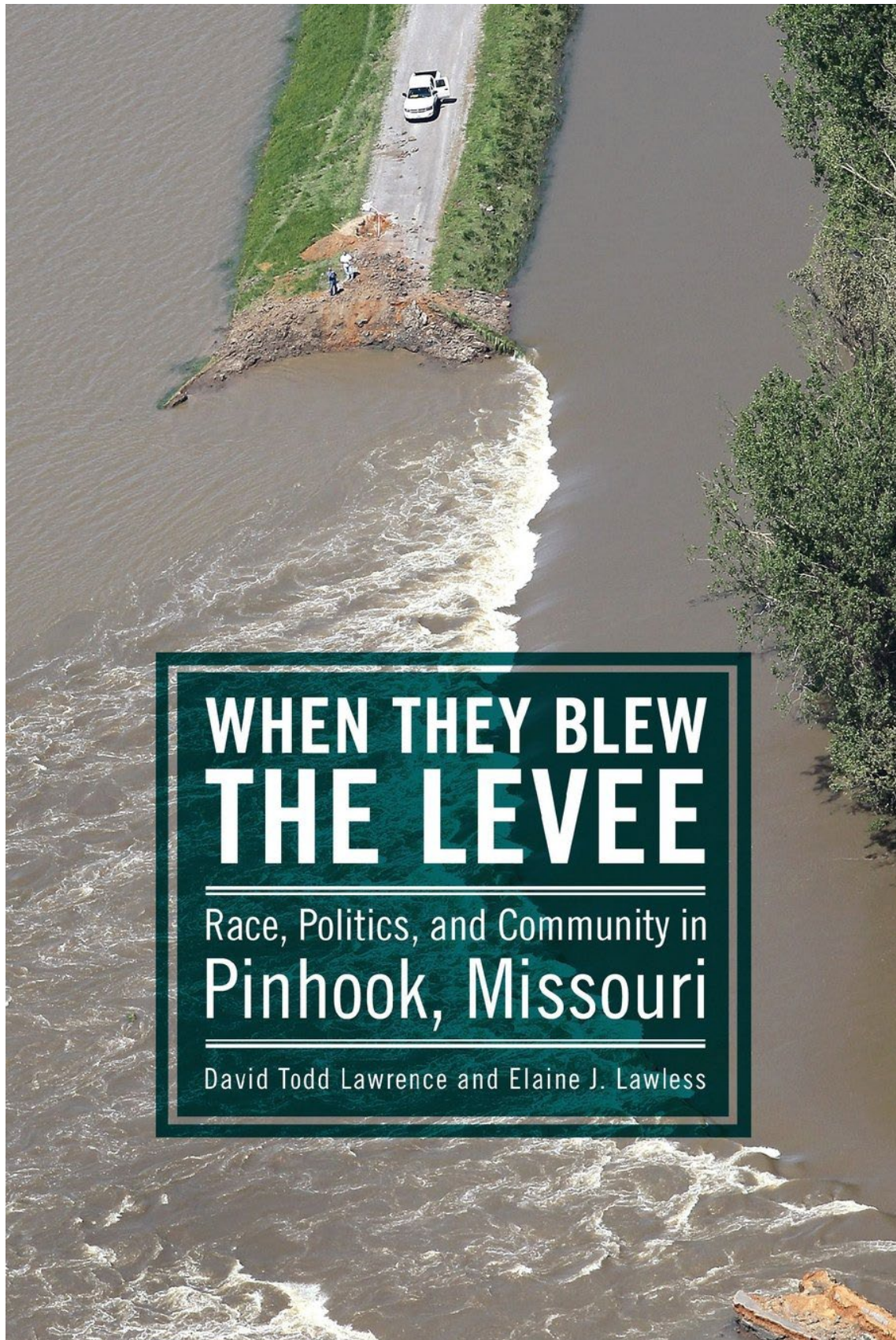
“The Refugee symbolizes the present as the passage through simultaneously felt pasts and futures....The Refugee can be a warning that what appears to be a gift might be the imposition of a debt, and what is heralded as resilience might be the imposition of responsibility for a crisis not of one’s making.”

Mimi Thi Nguyen, “The Refugee Tarot Card.”[1]

When They Blew the Levee is a fierce love letter to the power of community, one encoded to Black sociality, the broader American social imaginary, and the mythical power of the Mississippi River. In praxis, it is a political tool—a lyrical baseball bat—for the residents of Pinhook, Missouri to wield in a rally against the sustained structural violence of a biased



Pinhook Day Embrace, 2015. Image courtesy of David Todd Lawrence.



WHEN THEY BLEW THE LEVEE

Race, Politics, and Community in
Pinhook, Missouri

David Todd Lawrence and Elaine J. Lawless

David Todd Lawrence and Elaine J. Lawless, "When They Blew the Levee: Race, Politics, and Community in Pinhook, Missouri." (Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2018).

justice system and racialized world. In style, it is a careful requiem for the past/present/future generations of Pinhook, and perhaps Black folks (still) in migration in the United States.

Authors David Todd Lawrence and Elaine J. Lawless find a new way to look at the intricacies of state and national emergency response efforts, the legacies of the Atlantic Slave Trade and Jim Crow, practical Black Feminism(s), and community resilience through a deep rumination on the power of narrative. Like many stories about flooding and human loss, the intersection of natural events and imperfect (human) environmental management produced a dangerous event in which nature had its day. In the Spring of 2011, rising waters created historic flood conditions that endangered many along the length of the Mississippi River, including communities in Missouri's lower Bootheel region. In fact, by May 11, 2011, *The Atlantic* reported the following: "The upper Mississippi River basin has been experiencing near-record flooding for weeks now. Across Missouri, Illinois, Kentucky, and Arkansas, heavy rains have left the ground saturated and rivers swollen...experts estimate that as many as three million acres may become submerged in the next few days." [2] They quickly did. Few areas would come to know the unique varnish of destruction the waters of the Mississippi would produce quite like Pinhook, Missouri. As an all African American town, Pinhook's singularity and survival through the twentieth century is itself significant. As a Black city, Pinhook was a rural sanctuary of Black community, tradition, and social life. Common to the American story, the value of this community was lost on those in power. Pinhook has continued to be submerged by the official, government-sanctioned narrative of events. Lawrence and Lawless offer an unofficial narrative to counter the weight of federal and state agencies that they say neither prevented nor responded adequately to the flood emergency.

The front matter of *When They Blew the Levee* introduces a conversation on the power of story and, in the pages that follow, the book goes on to illustrate the multifaceted determination of a steadfast Pinhook community: from the town's formation to a now displaced city of over 300 residents and extended family whose homes were washed away when the Birds Point–New Madrid floodway was intentionally opened by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in 2011. In what was considered a success to the Corps, massive amounts of water plowed through floodway, through Pinhook, and essentially flushed the city in order to save the adjacent—only thousands larger—industrial city of Cairo, Illinois. This "intentional breach" caused irreparable damage to the homes, the families, and the town of Pinhook. [3] The townspeople had limited time to leave with anything but the essentials. They made it out with their lives, but lost pictures, heirlooms, and valuables.

As trained folklorists, the authors of the text carefully map their pragmatic methodology: Lawrence and Lawless work in a reciprocal ethnographic style and attempt to "include participants in studies where they share the articulation of their own intellectual and social history." [4] This critical intervention in the field of folklore and ethnography is significant across disciplines of twenty-first-century research and publication. This is especially so as it regards underrepresented rural communities and the particular voices of Black women like Pinhook's mayor, Debra Robinson.

For me, the presence of Debra Robinson resonates with the recent ethnography scholarship of Terrion Williamson's *Scandalize My Name: Black Feminist Practice and the Making of Black Social Life*. [5] Williamson (re)discovers her hometown, upbringing, and popular culture in order to advance discussions centering Black women through a Black Feminist Practice.

In episodes both exemplary and ordinary, Williamson combs both with and away from the grain of mainstream narratives about Black presence in the United States. Similarly, as a reader, witnessing Robinson's journey, and the journey of her sisters and mother, encourages me to think about the ways in which the fields of ethnography (and autoethnography) makes space for first-hand accounts through the prioritization of oral histories as a valid source of knowledge. The voices of Pinhook work to undo the single-story violence of erasure and establish a presence that allows for more pluralized representation of Black communities in the post-civil rights era. As Williamson writes: "Rather than being seen merely as the relics of a bygone era whose lives have no bearing on the lives of post-civil rights black women other than as historical lore, our grandmothers, mothers and other mothers help us to reckon with what it means to live wholly and completely, *in spite of*." [6]

Likewise, Lawrence and Lawless disrupt common logics of representation that often render Black and feminine voices invisible and unheard. They position the value of these narratives as "more likely to be 'heard' and supported by those in power when the efforts of women are framed in non-confrontational discourses," especially since in the "racialized cultural context of Missouri's conservative Bootheel region...power is held largely by white males who demonstrate little regard for the African American communities in their midst and often find black men intimidating and expect them to be confrontational." [7] This pair of quotes illustrate the ways in which processes that affect Black and feminine voices are also at work upon broader narratives of the Great Migration.


These stories, like many post-emancipation narratives, reach back to a United States history of enslavement and legacy models of sharecropping



*Debra Robinson and Elaine Lawless, Pinhook Day 2015, Sikeston.
Image courtesy of David Todd Lawrence.*

and land leasing in order to relay a sense of national progress away from the anti-blackness (and inherent anti-indigeneity) of the country's foundation of agrarian capitalism.[8] This trend is contested by the authors as they reference the great 1803 land deal known as the Louisiana Purchase.[9] Lawrence and Lawless offer a clear depiction of the ongoing modern-day challenges

of landownership in Missouri's Bootheel region: from clearing the land and managing wildlife to the difficulties of living with recurring and regular floods. The authors display a resilient community that lived with the quirks of the land. However, the intentional levee breach by federal forces, forever altered this way of life for the citizens of Pinhook.



The Refugee is the seventeenth card in the major arcana. Floating on the ocean's changing currents, the Refugee imparts strength to those living with uncertainty. The plant in the Refugee's hands is emblematic of a treasured home, but also the groundlessness of new beginnings. The Refugee symbolizes the present as the passage through simultaneously felt pasts and futures. In a reading, the Refugee can signal a crisis requiring an intervention. But while crisis might intensify as a catastrophic event, the danger might well be an ongoing condition or structure. The obstacles presented on the card are scenes of misplaced faith. Both the wall and the helicopter stand for outside forces that aim to regulate your movement; but they might also represent your own attachments to enclosure, or rescue, under another's power. The Refugee can be a warning that what appears to be a gift might be the imposition of a debt, and what is heralded as resilience might be the imposition of responsibility for a crisis not of one's making. The Refugee warns that while the crisis might describe the limits of a condition or structure—even a habit of being in the world—the desire for security and protection can also recruit control or even submission. The Refugee urges you to examine your objects of desire, and how their promises have brought you before obstacles to your own flourishing. * Mimi Thi Nguyen

*Mimi Khúc, guest editor. "Open in Emergency: A Special Issue on Asian American Mental Health," The Asian American Literary Review vol. 7, issue 2 (Fall/Winter 2016).
Image courtesy of Mimi Khúc.*

Lawrence and Lawless march us through emotional personal interviews and radical political accounts of this loss. Because of this style, it is with an empathetic Black feminism that we come to understand Black sociality to be something beyond the urban experience of Great Migration narratives that brought a group of black families to “Swampeast Missouri” in search of land on which to build their new world.[10]

Lawrence and Lawless write: “For those in power, the African American community of Pinhook was invisible, unimportant and dispensable.”[11] We are assured as readers that we are encountering an “erased town, but not an erased community.”[12] This helps me think through a potential solidarity in the relative position of both the refugee and the Black/African American citizen in migration along with Nguyen in the tarot card below. In the situation of 2011 Pinhook, the past and future are felt simultaneously in the present. As with the refugee, Pinhook residents are part of a greater generation which required African

American folks to take on a responsibility for a crisis not of one’s own making and the inheritance of a debt that at first appeared a gift. *When They Blew the Levee* enlists Critical Race Theory, Critical Urban and Critical Rural Studies, and Folklore to excavate the loss sustained by Pinhook. The crystalline structures Lawrence and Lawless create in the title chapter stun as they build a beat-by-beat analysis of the levee’s intentional breach. It veers toward filmic as we come to understand the language of this rural place off the Mississippi River: with sand boils, backwaters, and floodways.[13] The authors animate the titanic amount of water (550,000 cubic feet of water per second rushed into the 133,000 acres of spillway) and the substantial loss of home.[14] In this era of state-of-emergency thinking, *When They Blew the Levee* ruminates on the power of the nation-state to sanction violence, erasure, and invisibility that can, intentionally or not, remove whole communities from the map. Lawrence and Lawless remind us that, at least for Pinhook, community lives on, however changed.

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[6] Williamson, *Scandalize*, 9. (Italics in original.)

[7] Lawrence and Lawless, *When They Blew the Levee*, 97.

[8] For more on the Louisiana Purchase and agrarian capitalism, see Sublette, Ned. *The World That Made New Orleans from Spanish Silver to Congo Square*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, Distributed by Independent Publishers Group, 2008.

[9] Lawrence and Lawless, *When They Blew the Levee*, 123.

[10] Lawrence and Lawless, *When They Blew the Levee*, 37.

[11] Lawrence and Lawless, *When They Blew the Levee*, 13.

[12] Lawrence and Lawless, *When They Blew the Levee*, 15.

[13] Lawrence and Lawless, *When They Blew the Levee*, 130.

[14] Lawrence and Lawless, *When They Blew the Levee*, 131.

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About the Author

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