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While hurricanes are discrete natural events, storms like the Great Sea Island hurricane of 1893 have complex “unnatural” histories. Scholars of coastal risk and environmental history underscore that who and what is in harm’s way during a disaster are the results of political, economic, and social structures.\(^1\) In *Hurricane Jim Crow: How the Great Sea Island Storm of 1893 Shaped the Lowcountry South*, Caroline Grego explores the loss of life and the destruction wrought by this powerful hurricane. The Great Storm’s devastating impact on the Lowcountry’s African American community, she argues, resulted from longstanding oppression. Grego reckons with who and what ended up in the storm’s path and the politics of rebuilding and disaster relief in its aftermath. She argues that the storm led to a racist reordering of the post-Civil War South Carolina Lowcountry. White Carolinian policymakers and landowners took advantage of the disaster to implement a Jim Crow regime that disenfranchised and economically devastated the Sea Islands’ Black community.

**Erin Stewart Mauldin** opens this roundtable with a consideration of Grego’s framing of the short-term impact and long-term reverberations of the storm. She also reflects on *Hurricane Jim Crow*’s position in transnational histories of disaster and U.S. humanitarian aid. Mauldin applauds Grego’s approach to the Lowcountry environment (and southern environmental historiography), particularly *Hurricane Jim Crow*’s careful attention to the geography and materiality of the Sea Islands. How might Grego’s focus on the materiality of the Lowcountry model, for other disaster historians, suggest new ways to assess the disasters for which Americans collected aid?

*Hurricane Jim Crow* forwards environmental history of the Civil War era by focusing on the ecological aspects of emancipation and Reconstruction. **Edda L. Fields-Black**, like Mauldin, considers the work through the lens of archival sources, reflecting on the missing voices of Black workers and families in twentieth-century WPA interviews about the storm. Grego extracts stories of Black experience from these one-sided archives to investigate the relationship between white landowners and Black laborers. Fields-Black also poses several questions about Black Lowcountry residents’ experiences of the storm. How did various South Carolinian communities understand the New South, and what were the impact of hurricanes on such understandings? What role did the hurricane play in the formation of Gullah Geechee community identity in the Lowcountry, and how did the storm contribute to the

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community's diaspora? What was it like to work as a rice day worker, and how did the hurricane of 1893 shape labor and labor organizing in the Lowcountry?

In his contribution, Hayden R. Smith reflects on how the hurricane magnified Lowcountry residents' economic and political disadvantages. In the storm's aftermath, the politics of disaster relief became embedded in and shored up Jim Crow. Grego shows how Black Sea Islanders (and, at moments, Clara Barton's Red Cross) challenged the ways in which white South Carolinians used the disaster to seize power through welfare policies and land reform programs. Disaster relief, Grego argues, disrupted the isolation and autonomy that had nurtured the Gullah-Geechee communities of the Lowcountry. The same isolated environments that had insulated these communities and fostered their autonomy and distinctive culture exposed Black Sea Island residents to the violence of coastal storms. Smith, along with David Silkenat, highlights the multiple chronological scales at work in Hurricane Jim Crow. Silkenat identifies three time frames with which Grego explores the social and environmental transformations wrought by the Great Sea Island Storm of 1893. The first, short-term frame is structured around the deadly, destructive storm itself. The second considers the physical transformations the storm left behind. Grego examines the impact of storm damages on industry and the labor market and how white South Carolinians embraced these transformations as a means to undermine the political and economic autonomy of Black Lowcountry residents. Finally, the third and longest time frame highlights the Jim Crow disenfranchisement implemented after the storm as one of the broader forces that led to a long-term Black exodus out of the region. In this framing Silkenat sees a fresh framework with which to consider the long- and short-term impacts of disasters.

The next contributor returns to a central theme of this roundtable (and a core argument of the book): how racist laws and policy create the conditions for a natural disaster like the 1893 hurricane to devastate Lowcountry Black communities. Kathryn M. Silva reflects on Grego's success in telling this story through the lens of environmental history. A strength of Hurricane Jim Crow, Silva says, is Grego's work explaining the motivations of white South Carolinians in implementing Jim Crow policies through disaster relief and rebuilding programs. Yet Grego does not only tell a story of trauma and oppression. She also explores how African Americans mobilized (alongside the Red Cross) to provide disaster relief and challenge the Jim Crow aspirations of the South Carolina power structure.

In her response to this robust roundtable, Grego makes an argument for a microhistory of one place and one storm. She also explains the guiding questions that inspired her research to address roundtable interest in the hurricane's long-term influence across time and space. She shares two paths that her research has taken since publishing Hurricane Jim Crow. First, she outlines her interest in a broader environmental history of the Jim Crow South through careful attention to the history of science and ecology. Picking up on Fields-Black's questions about archival records that might capture the lives of individual Lowcountry residents, she explains a forthcoming digital history project inspired by the demographic details of Black
storm survivors in Clara Barton’s papers. Both are projects for environmental historians and historians of the South to await with great anticipation.

Before turning to the first set of comments, I would like to remind readers that as an open-access forum, *H-Environment Roundtable Reviews* is available to scholars and non-scholars alike, around the world, free of charge. Please circulate.
Growing up in middle Tennessee, I had no experience with hurricanes. I assumed that since meteorologists had advance knowledge of a hurricane’s approach, those storms were less terrifying than the sudden and seemingly more random tornadoes of my childhood. I know better now. In the years since relocating to coastal Florida, I have seen just how unpredictable even long-forecasted hurricanes can be. Wind and water defy meteorological models and ignore evacuation zone boundaries, and the damage they leave behind is often insidious, like the mold that grows inside your walls after floodwaters recede. Caroline Grego’s *Hurricane Jim Crow*, a study of the 1893 Great Sea Island Storm and its place in the longer history of the South Carolina Lowcountry, perfectly captures the chaos and catastrophe that follows a hurricane. I was riveted by her descriptions of the past, for in them, I recognized much of my present.

Across nine brief chapters, Grego reconstructs the post-Civil War South Carolina Lowcountry, a Black-majority Republican stronghold in an increasingly Democratic state, and then documents the 1893 hurricane itself. Not only did the storm’s force end the lives of thousands of coastal South Carolinians, but it also stripped away hard-won homes, weakened vital industries in the area, destroyed many farmers’ ability to coax crops from the land, increased levels of debt, and forced a long-autonomous Black community to seek aid from white politicians who saw widespread human suffering as a political and economic opportunity. The second half of the book shows that in the months and years after the 1893 landfall, white policymakers and landowners took advantage of one disaster—the hurricane—to create another: Jim Crow. Black Sea Islanders and to some extent, the American Red Cross, resisted such efforts, but hurricane assistance hinged in part on geography, race, wealth, and visibility, compounding the Lowcountry’s economic and political disadvantages. Grego skillfully navigates the triumphs and failures of each group involved in shaping the post-hurricane Lowcountry, never succumbing to the temptation to show Sea Island events in a simple declensionist arc. The result is a work that speaks to the strength of the human spirit, the entanglement of nature and capitalism, the politics of disaster relief, and Black efforts to push back against Jim Crow.

*Hurricane Jim Crow* adds to a growing number of important scholarly works on the intertwined histories of human communities and natural disasters. Like Grego, most of these authors recognize that while hurricanes or floods can be the result of natural phenomena, recovery from a disaster is often a very unnatural, very human process. Who you are, the resources you can access, the politics of relief in your area, and how visible your plight is to those in power are often as determinative as landfall location or wind speed in how well one weatheres a storm. Ted Steinberg, Mike Davis, Matthew Mulcahy, Joanna Dyl, Jack Davis, and others have also demonstrated how disasters can be used as a smokescreen for efforts to strengthen or destabilize local levers of...
socio-economic and racial power. Given the recent FEMA debacle in storm-ravaged Puerto Rico and the long shadow of Katrina recovery, readers will respond enthusiastically to Grego’s historical treatment of familiar themes such as misinformation campaigns, racial disparities in relief efforts, and the media’s role in politicizing death tolls in the wake of a disaster.

Of course, the primary benefit of studying disasters is that they provide a defined moment of change. There is a “before” and an “after” that scholars can examine, and, more practically, disasters typically are better documented in the historical record, allowing historians to hear voices that would go unpreserved in other circumstances. In Grego’s work, the hurricane enables her to analyze economic downtowns, political and racial oppression, environmental change, and demographic shifts all at once without having to choose one as the primary reason for Jim Crow’s inroads into the Lowcountry. But the explanatory ability of a natural disaster weakens the farther one gets away from it in time. That is potentially an issue here. While the first seven chapters center primarily on the early 1890s, the final two chapters look forward into the twentieth century. While it is helpful to see the results of the various initiatives to reshape the Lowcountry following the hurricane, it is difficult to see, with the evidence given, just how much the hurricane was to blame for the conditions of, say, 1921. There were other storms, other financial panics, other elections in the interval. How can we judge the causative weight of the Great Sea Island Storm decades down the road?

There are other disaster histories that Hurricane Jim Crow interacts sparingly with, but certainly makes contributions to. At the same time the Great Sea Island Storm was ravaging the Lowcountry, American evangelical philanthropists were raising money for starving Russians after the famine of 1891-2, displaced Christian Armenians of Ottoman lands during the Hamidian massacres, and the Indian famine of 1897. There are startling parallels in the moral causes of the American Red Cross in South Carolina, peppered as they were by racist assumptions that altered how assistance was distributed, and the motivational ethos of American missionary and reform networks that fanned out across the world during the same years. As Ian Tyrrell shows in Reforming the World, American reformers’ aid often came with conditions colored by white, middle-class mores. But were there environmental dimensions to their work? Were there environmental factors that changed how effective their philanthropy was? It would be interesting to see Grego’s hurricane of 1893 better situated in the larger historiography of US humanitarian aid. How does attention to

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the environmental aspects of these disasters Americans raised money for change historians’ narrative of their work?

Indeed, Grego’s attention to the Lowcountry landscape as a major player in the story is one of the book’s primary strengths. The heat, humidity, brackish water, marine life, soils, and geographic location of the Sea Islands all helped to shape not only the effects of the hurricane and the ability of South Carolinians to survive it, but also the region’s much longer history. Grego briefly surveys some of this in the Introduction and Chapter 1, referring to the early association of the Lowcountry with an agro-ecological regime deeply reliant on enslaved labor, environmental engineering, and capitalist networks that broke down in the wake of Union occupation during the Civil War and the upheaval of emancipation. She makes it clear that economic independence in the Lowcountry was dependent on mutable nature, whether in rice and cotton fields, phosphate mines, or subsistence plots. The landscape is also a primary character in some of the later chapters of the book, a target for and challenger to Progressive Era-projects to “drain” the Lowcountry of its excess water, perceived backwardness, and Blackness, and remake it into a more arable, more forward-looking, and ultimately whiter region.

The way that Grego approaches the Lowcountry environment engages with some of the oldest themes in southern environmental history: the region’s long use of enslaved labor, the physical legacies of the plantation system, and the overwhelmingly rural landscapes that southerners called home. The way that Hurricane Jim Crow tackles these topics is reminiscent of Mart Stewart’s seminal ‘What Nature Suffers to Groe’, which traces the nuanced connection between cultivator and cultivated along the Georgia coast from the 17th to the 19th century. However, Grego is also clearly influenced by the more recent “hybrid turn” in environmental history. Hurricane Jim Crow rejects the division between nature and culture, and does not see humans and nature on opposite sides, struggling for power. Instead, the early chapters, in particular, focus on the interrelationship of material environments, identity, and memory, and she does an excellent job of situating Lowcountry residents in a place, both physically and culturally.

Despite the causative force of the hurricane and the Lowcountry landscape throughout, Grego’s treatment of the environment often lacks the explicit interdisciplinarity of most material environmental history. There is allusion to soils, but little soil science outside the descriptions of phosphate development; references to disease, but no microbiology or epidemiology; and long reflections on agricultural systems, but little ecology or agronomy. There is a significant part of Chapter 2, “The Great Sea Island Storm,” that delves into the meteorology of hurricanes and 19th-century understandings of it. This is one of the strongest sections of the book. Not only does the analysis of the meteorological factors that created such dangerous storm surge imbue the narrative with suspense—a rare thing in history books—but

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it also provides a deep evidentiary base for the chapter’s conclusions. Just saying the hurricane was strong would be unsatisfying; showing how and why the 1893 hurricane was intense using science was incredibly effective. In Chapter 3, as Grego discusses the difficulties farmers faced in the wake of the hurricane, she mentions the intrusion of salt into local soils. She vividly describes cordgrass “weep[ing] salt from its spiky leaves” (66). Although it is brief, this attention to the changes happening in the physical environment helps ground her claim that recovery was difficult. In contrast, the same chapter contains discussion of how the contamination of drinking water following the hurricane led Lowcountry residents to begin to “fear sickness” and goes on to delineate what local physicians did to counter a possible epidemic, but she leaves out any analysis of dysentery, typhoid, or malaria and how they work or spread. Doing so would carry the reader beyond fearing sickness to a better understanding of the odds facing post-hurricane communities.

If *Hurricane Jim Crow* is augmenting much of the work in disaster history and southern environmental history, it is actively intervening—in a much-needed way—in the scholarship on the environmental history of the Civil War Era. Over the last twenty-five years, an increasing number of scholars have turned their attention to exploring the intersection of Civil War and environmental history, but less has been done on the ecological aspects of emancipation and Reconstruction coming out of that conflict. This is a lamentable gap in the field. After all, the widely recognized themes of the postbellum South—expanded cotton production, falling rice production, sharecropping, crop liens, Black Codes and vagrancy laws, the rise of the fertilizer industry, the enclosure movement—were tied to the land and struggles over who got to use it. Grego’s work shows how a network of Black-majority communities in the Lowcountry survived the post-Civil War Era and illuminates the role of the natural environment of that particular place in that story. In doing so, she is pulling Civil War Era environmental history into the next period, helping to show that the political end of Reconstruction meant little as far as Blacks’ labor on the land. That being said, *Hurricane Jim Crow* made me wonder: what would an environmental history of Jim Crow look like? What does environmental history illuminate about de jure segregation that legal or social history cannot? I think Grego has done an excellent job giving scholars a head start.
Comments by Edda L. Fields-Black, Carnegie Mellon University

I remember reading the recollections of formerly enslaved people in the South Carolina Lowcountry about “Big Storm,” “Flagg Storm,” or “Doctor Storm” among the WPA interviews. It was several years ago and I was writing the libretto for “Unburied, Unmourned, Unmarked: Requiem for Rice,” going back through primary sources, some of which I had written about in academic work, some of which I encountered for the first time. Either way, writing the libretto, I looked at the primary sources with a different eye. I am always looking for the voices of enslaved people and freed people through which their stories are told. This time, I was also looking for dramatic scenes in which they expressed their emotion and gave us a peek into their world and their souls.

The storm, like “Gun Shoot at Bay Point,” i.e. the November 1861 Battle of Port Royal, was one of the historical events that was so transformative in the Lowcountry that African-Americans in the region remembered it by name years, generations later. The WPA interviews about the storm were full of tragedy and pathos. But, the tragedy and pathos the African-Americans expressed to the WPA interviewers was largely about the white people who exploited their labor: an old white woman who was found dead with one shoe barely fastened; a young white girl found dead and rolled up in wire; naked people hanging in trees, the storm surge had dragged their clothes off of them; a husband and wife hanging on two tree limbs until they both got swept away; a young man seeing his parents float away. Some of the corpses had floated 15 to 20 miles away from home. One family lost 13 members. In the WPA interviews, we learn little about the Black people’s tragedy, unless they were hanging on the same tree as the white folks. In fact, Black workers and families bore the brunt of the tragic storm losses and their labor was exploited to clear debris and recover and bury white bodies in addition. But one would never know this from the WPA interviews.

Those interviewed in the Pawley's Island and Myrtle Beach remembered the storm raged at rice harvest time. The freed people were cutting rice and had left the cut rice in the field to dry when the storm came. The water washed the rice away and mixed it all up. But, on some plantations, they caught and dried it, salvaging it from ruin, this crop that had brought wealth to generations of Lowcountry South Carolina and Georgia enslavers, but misery and death to so many enslaved people.

Despite the one-sidedness of these primary sources, Caroline Grego’s Hurricane Jim Crow: How the Great Sea Island Storm of 1893 Shaped the Lowcountry South is evenhanded in its discussion of race in the South Carolina Lowcountry in the wake of the storm and the dynamics at work in the relationships between white planters and landowners and African-American workers. After reading Grego’s work, there are a few lingering questions I’d like to explore:

What was African-American South Carolinians’ vision of the New South? Was it different among African-Americans on the Sea Islands and coastal plains rice
plantations or was there more similarity than difference? And, how did the hurricanes impact it?

The Combahee Strike and the Pocotaligo strike among rice workers took place 18 years apart and in two different subregions and microenvironments of the coastal plains. Can connections among the leaders of both labor uprisings be documented? How were the labor conditions which led to labor organization among Black rice day workers and their labor strikes different before the hurricane versus after?

The Civil War period was a critical crucible in the genesis of Gullah Geechee identity, which crystalized in the early 20th century. How did the 1893 Hurricane and those which followed it in rapid succession over the next few years contribute to the galvanization of Gullah Geechee identity among African-Americans on South Carolina’s Sea Islands and coastal plains?

How did the hurricanes impact African-American migration out of the Lowcountry and the emergence of the Gullah Geechee Diaspora?
 Comments by Hayden R. Smith, College of Charleston

As a resident of Charleston County – a sliver stretching nearly one hundred miles along the central South Carolina coast – I am constantly reminded of hurricanes’ potential destruction. Beginning June 1, residents prepare for the possibility of impending storms and speculate on the fate of the season. Media outlets provide the ever-growing population hurricane preparedness guides and evacuation zones. Images of Hurricane Hugo – the 1989 storm that severely devastated the South Carolina coastline and generated a ten-year restoration effort – recall (especially to those who moved here after the event or who’s memories have faded) the destructive nature of such an event.

While this point goes without saying, natural disasters inflict dramatic changes upon the environment. Catastrophic events, like hurricanes, dramatically reshape the environments that they act upon. For humans, besides lives lost and the destructive toll on the built environment, hurricanes lead a ripple of long-term consequences that change the society living in the impacted environment. As environmental historians skillfully document, these events create a duality, with residents possessing through memory or hard realities a psychological barrier of life existing before and their subtle and direct changes taking place after.5

Contrasting the natural destruction brought by hurricanes and other natural disasters, the South Carolina Lowcountry also is reflective of systemic racial subjugation and violence extending over three-hundred fifty years. Beginning with the initial founding of Charles Town in 1670 and the use of enslaved laborers from Africa, via Barbados, and continuing into the post-emancipation era, people of color have battled both coordinated and subtle oppression.

With such a longstanding history of mistreatment in South Carolina (and the broader South), how does the focus of the 1893 Great Sea Island Storm change the perspective of race and environment? Is this event a flashpoint signaling a transformative moment or just a representation of historical unfolding centuries in the making? In addressing these questions, Caroline Grego, in Hurricane Jim Crow: How the Great Sea Island Storm of 1893 Shaped the Lowcountry South, provides an excellent analysis of the role that natural disasters play in exposing the inequalities of the marginalized.

At the heart of Grego’s argument are the lessons of how people use disruption to claim power (5-7). At first, the natural disaster exposes racial stereotypes imbedded in the Lowcountry. For example, the arrival of the Red Cross to help facilitate aid relief reveals these attitudes. Grego explains that, “(f)or Black sea islanders, maintaining their autonomy after the hurricane through the acceptance of short-term relief anchored their fight against the white elite, who resisted the presence of the Red Cross” (103). The Red Cross served as a buffer by the Gullah (in South Carolina) and the Geechee (in Georgia) to implement resistance against racist-driven power and control. Politicians resisted outside aid for all South Carolinians, unless seen to work in their favor and feared African American autonomy through land ownership. To the Gullah-Geechee, autonomy to maintain or gain land ownership was the central tool in maintaining agency against Jim Crow policies. However, elites issued top-down strategies to further marginalize communities following the Great Sea Island Storm. Governor Benjamin Tillman began a misinformation campaign against the Red Cross aid to “encourage white racial solidarity” (140). Grego explains that misinformation, specifically in newspaper editorials and political rhetoric, diverted attention away from real problems of aiding the disenfranchised.

The second point attributed to Grego’s analysis is how isolation and autonomy that helped create such a unique Gullah-Geechee culture was cast into disruption as government and private agencies implemented their own interpretation of relief. The geography of the Sea Islands provided isolation to communities and natural resources enabling subsistence foodways. These traditions have a longstanding history of survival and resilience that stem from enslavement. Sea Island plantation communities sought refuge away from the enslaver’s watchful eye by living on the “plantation periphery.” The enslaved sought plantation borderlands as a place of refuge, using down-time to escape the oppression of slavery. Descendants used agency developed under enslavement and implemented new strategies under Jim Crow. Ironically, the isolated environments that allowed Gullah-Geechee communities to express independence and develop a rich cultural society would also expose them to the most destructive aspects of hurricanes. Direct proximity to tide-water flood zones, limited natural protection, and low-lying settlements placed these communities in vulnerable positions when witnessing hurricanes’ destructive nature.

Following the wake of the storm and reeling from destruction, South Carolina boosters attempted to remake the Lowcountry through a Jim Crow lens by exploiting the Gullah community. Grego taps into the history that the marginalized had in reshaping approximately 250,000 acres of wetlands for plantation-based rice agriculture. Rice cultivators used “drainage” and “stagnation” to impound water for set amounts of time to irrigate the plants, while efficiently flooding and draining the fields up to four times a season, over the course of three-hundred years. People’s technological and environmental understanding of how to effectively draw water from a variety of sources – springs, second-order streams, and tidal-infused rivers –

provided agency during enslavement to create unique labor patterns, seen in the task system, which seldom existed outside of the South Carolina and Georgia Lowcountry. Grego advances this environmental imagery to emphasize how, metaphorically, drainage and stagnation fit into a post-bellum narrative of landscape, health, and race.

Grego’s focus on the race and the built environment complements Mart Stewart’s analysis of Lowcountry initiatives to instill order on a chaotic landscape. Stewart provides a model of hybrid landscapes of the natural and cultural on the southwest side of the Savannah River from Grego’s South Carolina subjects. Stewart explains how humans and nature are active forces, seen in Georgia rice plantations and the Geechee communities who skillfully constructed these environments. In presenting this argument, Stewart breaks away from presenting nature, or the non-human world, as an autonomous actor. Instead, the human and natural worlds establish an ebb and flow, as they move in relation to each other’s actions. Stewart also asks how do people view the non-human environment? To the rice planters, nature is disorderly. Rice cultivators sought to create order, seen in embankments and uniformity, out of a disorderly environment, seen in tidal rivers, floodplains, and natural disasters. As a result, people attempt to harness energy when several forces are working against each other. Stewart’s final argument is that environmental knowledge was power, seen in enslaved people’s labor and their agency to utilize agricultural knowledge to their advantage. Grego’s analysis of African American knowledge systems brings this analysis into the turn of the twentieth-century. The Gullah-Geechee harnessed the Sea Island landscape by working with the tidal ecosystems for their own subsistence and autonomy.7

Stagnation is the second metaphor that complements Grego’s important discussion of health and landscape improvement. Grego further connects race with environmental alteration by examining relief efforts to improve the health of Black-occupied land, yet a question arises: do these efforts actually play out to benefit the Gullah communities or are these efforts directed to benefit whites? Stagnation implies the dangers of water, specifically with the developing medical association of anopheles mosquitoes spreading malaria and other vector-related diseases. This metaphor is also a useful tool in understanding not only the Lowcountry’s economic limitations during the late nineteenth century, but the deep-rooted racism directed toward Blacks (176). The stagnation of society viewed by whites was remedied by the coercion of labor. Implied by Grego, the hurricane “distorted the line between the harm done by nature and the habituated disaster of racial oppression” (134). This point not only connects environment and race, as whites used this natural disaster as a device not only lobby against directed welfare policies to the marginalized, but also to tighten racial control to prevent – as Grego explains – Black racial, social, and economic independence.

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This interpretation complements Conevery Valenčius’ understanding how disease and landscape define society. Valenčius explains how topography contributed to European settlers’ racial definitions. She explains how “racial topography” associated higher elevations with free whites while lower elevations consisted of enslaved African Americans during the antebellum period. In a period before scientific understanding of vector ecology, people relied upon the body as a barometer to recognize what land was good and what land was less desirable. Wetlands consisted of matter disagreeable to the settlers, because of the visuals and scent of decaying matter, swampy bogs, and flood-prone regions. By recognizing which land was unhealthy, settlers attempted to reverse the environment’s ill effects on people. Valenčius explains how people continually tried to alter the landscape to eliminate disease and promote bodily health. Unlike specific environmental historians documenting twentieth century events, Valenčius explains that earlier generations saw the non-human landscape as posing potentially unhealthy environments and, by altering the land, these people attempted to transform their environment into an aesthetic they saw fit for their body without understanding the scientific basis behind that transformation.8

Drainage and stagnation reveal the elite’s ironic perceptions of the marginalized. White landowners depended upon the marginalized to perform the necessary work for economic prosperity, yet implemented systematic racist attitudes towards Lowcountry African Americans. The Lowcountry plantation aristocracy mistakenly believed that the Black majority attributed to the economic downfall after the Civil War. Unable, or unwilling, to accept the political and economic transformations taking place following a disruptive war, the elite relied on racist ideology to interpret this dramatically changing society (163). White racism driving Jim Crow policies also impacts aid distribution at times of need. How do natural disasters reveal, or fit into, the broader story of land reform and the marginalized? Who benefits from reform efforts, and on what level do people – ethically or economically – benefit from these efforts? Who is marginalized from these efforts and how? How are people manipulated to participate in these land reform movements, yet receive little direct benefit? South Carolina revisited the attempt at drainage for health, again relying on Black communities and their legacy of labor to reshape the landscape.

Grego’s use of drainage and stagnation as metaphors to document white society’s policies to segregate and eventually remove Blacks from South Carolina emphasizes the connection between environment and race in the Lowcountry. The chapter, “Draining the Black Majority,” reveals a systematic effort to depopulate Black political and social control within the Lowcountry through Jim Crow policies of a “one-party system of violence, disenfranchisement, economic subjugation, and segregation operating through state support” (146). In the case of Hurricane Jim Crow, race reflects the misunderstanding by a white society, unable to accept people as equals among an interconnected society.

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So, to return to an earlier point, is this story of the impact of a natural disaster revealing a changing society or just documentation of a flashpoint in history? Grego eloquently explains in *Hurricane Jim Crow* how the Gullah-Geechee community developed as a safeguard, or “buffer” (147) against racism – rooted in survival mechanisms from enslavement. Yet, white society implicated means of political, economic, and social control to maintain hegemony in a post-bellum Lowcountry. Despite the white elites’ attempt to maintain power, the Gullah-Geechee were already changing in demographics, labor practices, and society. These communities were not stagnant. The hurricane’s impact on the region exposed the dynamic shifts and instills fear in a white community unwilling to accept change. In essence, the South Carolina elites represented the sedentary ideologies of a bygone era. While natural disasters – seen in the 1893 Sea Island Storm – reveal devastation of the human and non-human spheres, a before-and-after moment, as people rebuild their communities as Grego so powerfully reveals, this event magnifies the *longue durée* of hegemony, manipulation, and agency still present in the Lowcountry.
In the nearly two decades since Hurricane Katrina devasted New Orleans, historians of the American South have paid increasing attention to the intersection of race and the environment. Of particular note for historians of the nineteenth century has been recent work by Alyssa Fahringer on disasters in 1870 Richmond, Susan Millar Williams and Stephen G. Hoffius on the Charleston earthquake of 1886, Erin Stewart Mauldin on the Cotton South during Reconstruction, and Hayden Smith on South Carolina rice plantations. Among this recent flourishing in scholarship, Caroline Grego’s *Hurricane Jim Crow* stands out for how effectively she blends methodology from both environmental and social history. She persuasively demonstrates how an 1893 hurricane devastated and transformed the South Carolina Lowcountry.

The South Carolina Lowcountry, comprising the Sea Islands and the adjacent mainland counties, had always had a distinct character. The development of rice as a cash crop in the early colonial era prompted Lowcountry enslavers to import thousands of enslaved Africans to labor in some of the deadliest conditions in the American mainland. With a substantial Black majority, the Lowcountry developed its own rhythms and customs distinct from the rest of the South, including unique labor practices in both slavery and freedom. The Civil War and emancipation had transformed the region, as it shifted from rice cultivation to phosphate mining and “two days’ system” of land tenancy. Even after the hightide of Black political power during Reconstruction had receded, African Americans in the Lowcountry retained significant political and economic autonomy, at least at the local level, as the Black majority and high rates (relatively speaking) of land ownership provided some degree of self-determination and agency. This autonomy enraged white supremacists like politician Ben Tillman and Rev. Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, who saw the Lowcountry as an affront to their conception of racial hierarchy.

Grego demonstrates that the Great Sea Island Storm of 1893 remade the Lowcountry in three time frames. In the short term, she details the profound devastation and loss of life from the storm itself. Striking at night and during high tide, the hurricane inundated the low-lying region, destroying homes and drowning three hundred people (possibly many more), washing away whole communities, while survivors clung to sturdy live oaks and flotsam. The wind and water laid waste to churches, warehouses, and schools and stranded ships miles from their moorings.

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In the days and weeks after the hurricane, white elites in Charleston downplayed the storm’s damage. Although the storm caused significant damage to the city, leaders like Harry Hammond (son of Senator James Henry Hammond) claimed that the city could rebuild without outside assistance. White South Carolinians vocally opposed any intervention from the federal government or outside charity. They even rejected state-level aid, associating it with Reconstruction-era policies that they abhorred. On the islands, however, the Black majority faced disease, starvation, exposure, and dehydration: like in many hurricanes, the period after the hurricane proved as deadly as the storm itself. Two ad hoc local relief organizations emerged, one in Charleston for whites and one in Beaufort for African Americans, the latter led by former congressman Robert Smalls. In October 1893, more than a month after the hurricane, Clara Barton’s Red Cross took over relief and recovery efforts. In addition to providing food, clothing, and medical treatment, Barton hoped the Red Cross could transform the Black community in the Lowcountry, urging them to abandon their “habits of begging and conditions of pauperism; to teach them self-dependence, economy, thrift; [and] how to provide for themselves and against future want” (107). Grego credits the Red Cross with providing meaningful relief to both white and Black hurricane survivors (despite limited funding), but argues that Black sea islanders performed the lion’s share of the labor to rebuild their communities.

In the medium term, the 1893 hurricane transformed the Lowcountry. The storm destroyed the expensive phosphate dredgers and intricate hydraulic systems necessary for rice cultivation, destruction that effectively shuttered these industries. This economic crisis prompted a Black exodus from the Lowcountry in search of work. Equally importantly, white South Carolinians saw the storm as an opportunity to strip Black Lowcountry residents of their political and economic autonomy, imposing Jim Crow on a bastion of Black independence. White Democrats like Harry Hammond and Ben Tillman envisioned remaking the Lowcountry with a white majority. They encouraged white settlement by using Black convict labor to drain Lowcountry wetlands to create new landowning opportunities. A new state constitution in 1895 imposed property and literacy tests for voting. While these efforts failed to transform the Lowcountry as much as white Democrats hoped, it did mark an end to the comparative autonomy that Black sea islanders enjoyed.

In the long term, Grego argues that the 1893 hurricane marked a turning point in the racial history of the Lowcountry. The lingering and protracted impact of the storm drove African Americans out of the region, creating a white majority by the 1920s. Many Black sea islanders became part of the Great Migration, leaving the South for the potential of a better life in Harlem, Chicago, and Detroit. Grego is careful not to oversell the hurricane’s impact, recognizing the broader forces that brought about Jim Crow segregation and disenfranchisement across the South. Yet, she persuasively argues that the storm created a catalyst for change that had ramifications for generations.

Several features of Hurricane Jim Crow stand out. First, Grego makes the most of the paucity of sources written by African Americans from the Lowcountry. Despite this
source problem, Grego is able to give the reader a real sense of the Black community in the Sea Islands, their suffering during and after the hurricane, and their efforts to retain political and economic autonomy in the face of an overwhelming white supremacist campaign. A few Black islanders emerge as fully fleshed out individuals, most notably Quash Stevens, whose experiences before and after the hurricane bookend the volume. Second, Grego's framing provides innovative ways to think about the long and short effects of natural disasters (which are, of course, really human disasters). While other environmental historians have used the concept of a slow disaster, Grego does a masterful job in demonstrating the hurricane's generational effects. Indeed, in her conclusion, she tracks the storm's long-term consequences to the present Lowcountry landscape of golf courses and resort homes.

If *Hurricane Jim Crow* warrants any criticism, the book could have leaned more heavily into environmental science. While Grego artfully demonstrates the effect of the hurricane on the human population of the Lowcountry, one wonders about the effect it had on the broader ecosystem. How did the post-hurricane drainage efforts transform the landscape? How did the transition from rice cultivation to subsistence farming effect local and migratory wildlife? What effect, if any, did the destruction of the phosphate industry have? These minor quips, however, should not detract from an excellent work of scholarship that should obtain a wide readership.
Hurricane Jim Crow is a beautifully written, deeply researched, and heartbreaking history of the aftermath of the 1893 Great Storm on the South Carolina Lowcountry’s African American community. Hurricane Jim Crow begins with a story of Quash Stevens, the mixed-race son of one of Kiawah Island’s white planters and former enslaver, Elias Vanderhorst. Using Steven’s story to bookend the manuscript, Grego skillfully argues the Great Storm’s impact on the Lowcountry’s African American community directly resulted from centuries of oppression. Grego’s research exposes the concerted effort of racist politicians, elite white landholders, former Confederate sympathizers, and white Carolinians, along with a racist national government, to use methods within their power to block African American agency and aid after this devastating storm. This text uncovers how African Americans used their limited resources and power to alleviate the suffering of thousands. This story also brings to light Clara Barton’s and the Red Cross’s labor in fighting Governor Benjamin Tillman and the South Carolina power structure. Hurricane Jim Crow is also a history of white South Carolinians’ discriminatory practices to leverage the loss of African American life to remove Black landownership, autonomy, and economic gains made during and since Reconstruction. The purpose and success of this work demonstrates how racist laws and policy create the conditions for natural disasters to devastate Black communities. This manuscript argues the environment disparately impacted the African American community in the Lowcountry because of centuries of white supremacy that began under slavery and subsequently perpetuated under Jim Crow. One cannot understand the history of the Lowcountry, hurricanes, race, class, gender, and labor of African Americans without investigating how the natural environment can devastate an oppressed community. As Grego states, “A full understanding of the region requires recognizing that labor, race, class, and gender produced a distinctive Lowcountry environment” (3)

The strength of this text, supported by a detailed analysis of government data, is Grego’s ability to illuminate how this storm upended the Black community. Grego begins the manuscript with the history of South Carolina’s Lowcountry, focusing on the region’s history of enslavement on rice and indigo plantations. The first chapter gives a deep history of land ownership and autonomy by African Americans post-slavery and how the Lowcountry’s Black majority suffered hate and jealousy from white South Carolinians. However, the lack of industry, aside from phosphate mining, and discriminatory practices throughout the American South made the Black community particularly vulnerable to the devastating 1893 Great Sea Island Storm.

The Great Storm of 1893 is a gut-wrenching story that is the heart of the text. Grego’s powerful writing is in full force in chapters Two and Three. Using government documents, personal narratives, and local newspapers, Grego uncovers stories of mass devastation and humanity. The second chapter retells the harrowing tale of the “deadliest fourteen hours in Lowcountry history”(44). Grego reveals the personal
stories of citizens who witnessed that night’s devastating loss of life and the heroism of Black men and women in the eye of the storm.

What follows is Grego’s detailed analysis of the storm’s uneven impact on Black and white citizens. Grego explains that the Lowcountry’s wealthy white landholders depended on African American sharecroppers whom they exploited and left vulnerable to the ravages of massive environmental catastrophes like the Great Storm of 1893. The remainder of the text is a detailed history of 1893-1895 and the slow and challenging post-Storm recovery spearheaded by Black politicians, local activists, and the community, including Robert and Annie Smalls and the American Red Cross, spearheaded by the efforts of Clara Barton and the Penn Center. Moreover, Grego’s analysis of the storm’s aftermath details the choices white Carolinians made to ensure the Black community remained disenfranchised, unhoused, and economically devastated.

Unpacking the motivations of white South Carolinians and the resulting policies is a strength of this text. Grego successfully clarifies the detailed efforts of Governor Tillman to thwart any efforts to assist the region’s recovery efforts if it in any way would help the Black community. Grego finds that as far as Tillman and South Carolina’s white citizens were concerned, African Americans brought the storm’s impact upon themselves. Furthermore, as Grego writes, the Black community accepted Barton’s help despite “the unrelenting, condescending racism from Red Cross volunteers” (133). White backlash followed any attempt of the Red Cross to offer aid to the Lowcountry’s Black citizens. Ultimately, “white supremacists saw the hurricane as lending fuel to their Jim Crow project, beginning a process of dispossession and demographic diminishment they wanted to further” (174).

*Hurricane Jim Crow* is a well-researched history of South Carolina’s Lowcountry and the expectational history of the region. Future exploration of this history could include local African American organizations, including faith-based, mutual-aid organizations, and historically Black Colleges, who may have aided the Lowcountry’s Black residents in the aftermath of the storm; however, with limited extant sources, Grego successfully creates an inclusive narrative and examination of the history of the substantial impact of the environment and hurricanes on the socio-economic history of South Carolina.
Almost every time that I told another southerner that I was writing a book about a hurricane, I inevitably heard stories about their encounters with hurricanes. From South Carolinians, I heard most about Hurricane Hugo, which struck the state to widespread devastation in 1989. (I slept through it as a baby, while my parents watched the wind bend trees in two from our house in Columbia. My grandparents, aunts, and uncles on the coast lived without power for six weeks.) Some mentioned Floyd in 1999. Others pointed to hurricanes that blasted the coast three years in a row in the mid-2010s, Matthew foremost among them in 2016. A few folks could recall Gracie in 1959.

And on rare, meaningful occasions, a couple people shared memories from their families of the Great Sea Island Storm of 1893. After I gave a talk at the Reconstruction Era National Historical Park’s Darrah Hall on St. Helena Island, South Carolina, one audience member read aloud a direct ancestor’s account of the hurricane. The ancestor wrote of the terror of high water and high winds, vision twice shrouded by nighttime and the hurricane’s clouds; and how he and his family barely survived. This story followed contours that were familiar to me from other accounts I had read, but here animated anew because it reminded me of the ongoing human connections to the hurricane. The hurricane still dwells in the memories of some South Carolinians, even if through family stories rather than direct experiences. That was, for me, evidence of the hurricane’s long-reaching legacy in the Lowcountry.

That hurricanes mark memories is no revelation, really, but it speaks to the ability of hurricanes to shape experiences and remembrances. Indeed, hurricanes have left an imprint in the memories of participants in this roundtable. Two of the reviewers begin their comments by reflecting upon their hurricane season experiences within Florida and South Carolina. From my perspective as a historian, though, I must recognize that the ways that hurricanes shape memories are fraught. Everybody wants to talk about the hurricanes that they remember because surely a brush with something so massive, elemental, and dangerous must mean something. This can imbue hurricanes with immense explanatory power to survivors and, perhaps, historians—maybe even more than a given hurricane may deserve.

I have been conscious of this since I began this project as my dissertation at the University of Colorado Boulder in 2016. I’d had a conversation with Peter H. Wood about major hurricanes in South Carolina. We came to the 1893 storm, which I knew about only vaguely as the deadliest hurricane in the state’s history. Its occurrence in the 1890s, a pivotal decade in the rise of Jim Crow across the South, and its impact on Beaufort County, a last hold-out of Reconstruction in the state, sparked my interest. What role had the hurricane played or been channeled into during those tumultuous times?—if any? Thomas Andrews, one of my dissertation committee members, asked me to keep this pair of questions in my mind as I worked: “What did the hurricane really do—and what did it not do?” Those two questions hung over everything I read.
and wrote about the storm for the next several years. But ultimately, I did not hesitate to exert my own judgment in writing about what I see as the long-term effects of the hurricane. The responses here show a mixed reaction to my depiction of the hurricane’s long durée, as Hayden Smith puts it. I expected that. And not in the anxious way in which one anticipates every possible reaction to one’s scholarship—instead, in the spirit of academic conversation.

Before I address the thoughtful and engaging critiques of the reviewers, I first want to thank them for their time and efforts in reading and responding to my book. It is still strange to think it has been out in the world since Fall 2022 and that people are not just reading it, but writing about it too. As for Drs. Mauldin, Silkenat, Smith, Fields-Black, and Silva, I am humbled by their care with the text, their praise, and their generative comments. I feel that they understood what I wanted to do with my book—often expressing it better than I sometimes feel I do—and that means a great deal to me. What I will address in the rest of my response are three of their main points of critique; and two of their suggested avenues of exploration for myself and other historians.

Now, back to the questions of what the hurricane did and did not do. The reviewers here, who diverge some on this topic, are not the only people who have brought it up. A couple journal reviews and a few readers over the years have raised this question, too. Dr. Mauldin, noting that the book drifts some in Part III, asks “How can we judge the causative weight of the Great Sea Island Storm decades down the road?” Smith brings up the trickiness of memory, the passage of time, and the tangled causality of human experiences in determining long-range impact. He points to “residents possessing through memory or hard realities a psychological barrier of life existing before and their subtle and direct changes taking place after.” He also engages in an extended meditation on Part III’s discussion of drainage, stagnation, and cycles of environmental, social, and demographic change in the Lowcountry, which I spin out from the hurricane’s aftermath. Silkenat found my approach sufficiently cautious. He wrote that “Grego is careful not to oversell the hurricane’s impact, recognizing the broader forces.”

The third act of the book is clearly the most “controversial” part of the book for readers. I follow the hurricane’s trails of destruction across the Lowcountry’s time and space, and I can see where they may grow faint at times. What I do see is that the hurricane became a part of Lowcountry history in this indelible way, and following those traces felt necessary. In any case, I hope people read it, form their own thoughts on it, and continue to share those with me. What does the hurricane touch? What did it become a part of? And what did it fail to reach?

The reviewers introduce two points of criticism for which I have no real defense, however. Mauldin and Silkenat both ask, rightfully, how my book would have been enriched with a more robust engagement with the history of science and the field of ecology. Mauldin points to how my discussion of meteorology in Chapter 2 brings to bear a deeper understanding of why this hurricane was so dangerous, even absent
the technology that meteorologists now have that can forecast and gauge the strength of storms. Her comment that extending a similar analysis to the fears of sickness in the weeks after the hurricane certainly has me wishing I had done so and curious as to what I would find if I revisited the sources that I used for that section. Silkenat asks what the environmental effects of the abandoned former phosphate mines and shuttered phosphate factories were—and those are questions I have begun to pursue because I have the same interest. It’s become fodder for another project, even if their inclusion would have added something meaningful to this book. It is a reminder to me that books are never as finished as you want them to be.

A couple reviewers also observed that the book exists in a somewhat closed world, geographically and historiographically. I admit to being parochial, and I defend it too. I lean into it because I think that an intense focus on a specific place produces—ideally, anyway—writing with a depth of understanding gained in no other way. In my eagerness to know South Carolina and especially the Lowcountry well, I do spend a great deal of time looking in a particular direction. I think it has its benefits for the book, and I would not alter my intensely local focus. But I acknowledge that examining historical events on different geographic scales can provide other, valuable perspectives.

Fields-Black expresses curiosity about the lives of individual Black residents of the Lowcountry and wonders where else they might be found in the archival record. She points to, for example, the Black farmers and farmworkers from Pocotaligo who petitioned the American Red Cross to continue aid despite the pressure from white landowners to stop. I wanted to know the same. This line of questioning inspired a digital history project that will be published sometime this upcoming winter 2024-2025. When I first looked through the Clara Barton Papers in 2017, digitized through the Library of Congress, I noted that the papers contained the names of and information about many hundreds of Black residents of the Lowcountry. So I put together a set of Excel spreadsheets that tagged the names of over three hundred African American storm survivors referred to in those papers with their recorded location and their role in the relief effort, whether as recipients of assistance, participants in the relief work, or petitioners to the Red Cross. In spring 2023, I brought these spreadsheets to Leah Worthington, co-director of the Lowcountry Digital History Initiative, to develop a permanent online home for this information. Worthington, with graduate student assistants from the College of Charleston, has built an incredible interactive map from those spreadsheets and a hyperlinked list of all those names. I have developed exhibit text that draws out new stories and interpretations of these records. The project is currently undergoing revision and review, and we expect it to go live later this year or early next. My hope is that this open access, freely available digital project will be useful to descendants, Lowcountry residents, and researchers who may wish to trace some of these people through time.

As for where this book takes me, Mauldin concludes her review by asking what an environmental history of Jim Crow might look like and generously commenting that my book helps bring historians down that road. After all, she writes, “the widely
recognized themes of the postbellum South—expanded cotton production, falling rice production, sharecropping, crop liens, Black Codes and vagrancy laws, the rise of the fertilizer industry, the enclosure movement—were tied to the land and struggles over who got to use it.” Envisioning and shaping that project is exactly what occupies my own thoughts and energies. I followed the 1893 hurricane for years to see how it could help me better understand not only the Lowcountry but also the ways that environmental change unfolds inextricably with human experiences. Keeping in mind the feedback that I have received here, I plan to shift away from the hurricane, but to continue to explore what a southern environmental history of the early decades of Jim Crow might look like, in and beyond South Carolina.
Edda L. Fields-Black teaches history at Carnegie Mellon University and has written extensively about the history of West African rice farmers and slavery on Lowcountry and Georgia Rice plantations, including in such works as COMBEE: Harriet Tubman, the Combahee River Raid, and Black Freedom during the Civil War and Deep Roots: Rice Farmers in West Africa and the African Diaspora. She was a co-editor of Rice: Global Networks and New Histories, which was selected as a Choice Outstanding Academic Title. Fields-Black has served as a consultant for the Smithsonian National Museum of African-American History and Culture’s permanent exhibit, "Rice Fields of the Lowcountry." She is the executive producer and librettist of "Unburied, Unmourned, Unmarked: Requiem for Rice," a widely performed original contemporary classical work by celebrated composer John Wineglass.

Caroline Grego is a historian of and originally from South Carolina who studies the histories of labor and the environment during Jim Crow. She is an assistant professor of history at Queens University of Charlotte and the author of Hurricane Jim Crow: How the Great Sea Island Storm of 1893 Shaped the Lowcountry South (UNC Press, 2022). She has also published essays in, among other venues, the American Historical Review and the Journal of Southern History. Her scholarship has been supported by the American Council of Learned Societies, the American Society for Environmental History, and the Carolina Lowcountry and Atlantic World Program.

Erin Stewart Mauldin is the John Hope Franklin Professor of Southern History at the University of South Florida and author of Unredeemed Land: An Environmental History of the Civil War and Emancipation in the Cotton South (Oxford, 2018).

Kara Murphy Schlichting is an Associate Professor of History at Queens College, City University of New York. Her work in late-19th- and 20th-century American History sits at the intersection of urban and environmental history. She is the author of New York Recentered: Building the Metropolis from the Shore (University of Chicago Press, 2019).

David Silkenat is currently Professor of U.S. History at the University of Edinburgh. He is the author of four books, most recently Scars on the Land: An Environmental History of Slavery in the American South (OUP, 2022). In August 2024, he will become the Richard J. Milbauer Chair in Southern History at the University of Florida.

Kathryn M. Silva’s book manuscript in progress, “At Times We May Seem Bold: African American Women in the Southern Textile Industry, From Slavery to Civil Rights,” examines the role of Black women in the Southern textile industry. She published “Daughters and Sons of the Dust: The Challenges of Accuracy in African American Historical Film" The History Teacher (February 2018) and “African American Millhands, the Durham Hosiery Mills, and the Politics of Race and Gender in the Durham’s Textile Industry, 1903-1920” North Carolina Historical Review,
Spring 2017. Her research earned grants from the John Hope Franklin Research Center for African and African American History and Culture, Duke University, Institute for Southern Studies, University of South Carolina, and the Archie K. Davis Fellowship, North Caroliniana Society, Chapel Hill. Silva served as co-lead writer and Program Director on a $500,000 three-year Andrew W. Mellon Grant to infuse workforce competencies in Claflin’s Humanities General Education courses. Dr. Silva holds a B.A. in History and Africana Studies from the University of Massachusetts, Boston, and an M.A. and Ph.D. in History from the University of South Carolina.

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