afterword

political literacy and voice

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for Kara

We do not believe that the American people who have encouraged such scenes by their indifference will read unmoved these accounts of brutality, injustice and oppression. We do not believe that the moral conscience of the nation—that which is highest and best among us—will always remain silent in face of such outrages.

—Ida B. Wells, "Mob Rule in New Orleans," 1900[1]

read three images

A *Monthly Review* photograph of a tank with armed soldiers—actually members of the State Police Tactical Unit who with their assault weapons pointed down or slightly up just look like armed soldiers—patrolling the streets of New Orleans while black residents outside a shelter of "last resort" call out for help.[2]

A Reuters photograph of uniformed white men disciplining black men sprawled face down on dry concrete; the white men patting down and surveying the black men, who've been stopped in their efforts to flee catastrophe (marked as carjackers?); one officer positioning a foot inside the door of the postal vehicle he has just rescued. The caption reads: "Texas game wardens watch over people who were caught using a mail truck to try to escape New Orleans. They were freed but forced to continue on foot."

The image of a white couple wading through water with groceries juxtaposed with the image of a young black man wading through water with groceries—their respective captions

identifying the white couple as "searching" for food and the black man "looting" for his.

speak three words: shoot to kill

Redundant death or overkill is mapped onto black New Orleans so strongly that most are silenced or speak feeble responses to the realities of institutional abandonment, neglect, paternal contempt and caretaking, and state and social violence before and after Katrina landed. Witness those who walk in and through a city turned urban graveyard—first moving and floating, then drying in mire—struggling to gain a foothold, and to voice a literacy that counters denials and executioners' commands levied against those "left to die." (Survivors wrote on a chalkboard in St. Mary's middle school, where they sought refuge from the waters flooding the Ninth Ward, "They left us here to die.") Challenging silence on the state's responsibility for death and social instability, *What Lies Beneath: Katrina, Race, and the State of the Nation* creates space for vocal, politically literate voices.

The images and language of post–Katrina New Orleans, like that of post–9/11 United States, inspire new voices, such as those presented in this anthology, and an infusion of radicalism into common sense or everyday politics to promote literacy relevant to crises where deadly domestic and foreign policies increasingly intersect (a quarter of the Louisiana National Guard was absent from relief efforts due to deployment in Iraq, where over 600,000 Iraqis, according to a Johns Hopkins study, and approximately 3,000 US citizens have died since the US invasion). This volume provides us with a grammar book shaped by previous battles for justice, love, and safety for self and community. The voices represented here, whether native New Orleanians or not, build a foundation to resist dehumanization, and so as part of the "voices of Katrina," echo historical narratives that frame and shape the meanings of current trauma, dislocation, and death.

litany for survival

Months before I traveled to New Orleans, searching for a "litany for survival," I reached for Ida B. Wells's writings on lynching and police brutality, assigning "Mob Rule in New Orleans" to my students as a grammar book on antiblack racism and social and state violence. Vilifying and policing, containing and punishing black bodies seemed more important to state officials than saving black lives in the days and weeks during which state officials and media sought to interpret and assign blame for human loss and man-made or compounded disaster following Katrina. That the state placed abandoned survivors under a shoot-to-kill edict to criminalize their right to survival left some of us momentarily speechless, and required more political literacy and critical voice than that readily available through the language of conventional politics.

As Governor Kathleen Babineaux Blanco and President George W. Bush drew a bulls-eye target around largely black survivors we had witnessed trying to survive—and some failing and so dying—without assistance from a state to which they swore some allegiance or belonging ("we're American, too"), words drew me and destabilized me until I realized that I had to translate my disgust and distress into political literacy. It was not human suffering per se, but suffering accompanied by repression embedded in the injunction of death for the resourceful who didn't want to roll or rot in misery that radicalized me into seeking more voice.

Literacy transports us into politics. Not always coherent or seamless, radical literacy is at least alive to possibilities for change and social transformation, possibilities for resistance. Resistance may start in crisis. If you reach a point where the state, by its own rhetoric, promises to use lethal force against responsible people who are trying to prevent their children, themselves, or others from prematurely dying or needlessly suffering, then you're at a crossroads. Here, the moment of crisis is compounded by the government, so that it seems logical to suggest, given the "shoot-to-kill" decrees, that good

or competent (black) parents and community-minded survivors secure bulletproof vests before seeking ("looting") bottled water, baby formula, and pampers; or before taking vehicles to flee danger; or, having been stripped of technology at gunpoint by game wardens from an adjoining state, before attempting to cross bridges on foot into surrounding parishes—only to be turned away at gunpoint by state officials. In the continuity of blacks in crisis amid the discontinuity of ecological and manufactured disaster crises, will it matter if we are called "Americans" rather than "refugees"? When and where is nation-state membership a passport that possesses tangible value in terms of mobility and survivability, a value that state and civil society must respect for bodies first and foremost recognized as black and impoverished rather than *human*? And who or what can demand, maintain, and enforce that respect when it has been denied?

Struck by and drawn to the voices of historical black mothers trying to keep their children alive and healthy in earlier eras, I hear the continuity of contempt for black humanity amid the discontinuity of epochal disaster and warfare and the continuity of resistance. In Ida B. Wells and Mamie Till-Mobley, a literacy and voice encourage hope and struggle for viability and independence despite institutions that promote premature death and misery through neglect and punishment. Ancestral voices are able to give a literacy that comprehends death edicts coded as law-and-order mandates to be something other than isolated phenomena. The voices of past radicals provide a legibility that enables us to read and then act against the mapping of oppression onto our everyday and extraordinary realities.

State-sanctioned death and dying, overkill for the black frame, have historically been features of US official and unofficial policies towards racially fashioned subjects, the stated or understated enemies to be contained at home and abroad. Policing rhetoric and practices include the visceral: scarred black civilian bodies from the murderous force used in the Danzinger Bridge tragedy, in which police engaged in a shooting spree of

innocents as they sought snipers; self-deputized posses, white citizens grinning as they describe to Spike Lee, on tape, their stockpiled weapons for shooting (black) people in order to protect their property (Lee questions, after hearing the gun inventory, if the homeowners are hunting for Bin Laden).

We have heard and seen this before, hence the familiarity to some. Centuries-old grammar books of resistance document the hunter and the prey. Yet when I traveled to New Orleans, I was floored to see the new forms of policing and containment, despite the historical memory and meaning of earlier activists and writers that shaped my ability to read and speak.

southern horrors

When Howard, a former member of the New York City chapter of the Black Panther Party, drove me through the Lower Ninth Ward in March 2006, I saw how 21st-century traumas evoke 19th-century terrors. In the Lower Ninth, post-Reconstruction lynching described in *Southern Horrors* resurfaces. Here, though, only clothes flutter in tree limbs.[3] Here, the dead haven't left bodies behind, to be cut down and buried, to shock the living into mourning. Here is just the suggestion of departed frames, in shirtsleeves and pants legs swaying in breezes or hanging limply from branches, clothing not retrieved months or years after they rooted in the trees of the Lower Ninth. Can there be lynching without a formalized lynch party? Is Billie Holiday's "strange fruit" the predictable harvest from an apartheid city-state left with paltry resources, whose impoverished and outcast have been left to die?

Survivors straggle back by any means necessary to a beloved city, where the majority outside of institutional power never traveled from home, to counter the narrative that they were strung up and are dispossessed. They may read not only a history of repression and resistance into themselves (recalling when levees were "blown up" in earlier eras) but themselves into history (as black New Orleans registers as one of the eviscerating moments of recognition—a fast-forward blur of shared identities

through slave codes mutating into black codes and Jim Crow, lynching, the convict prison lease system and current prison mandates)—the historical legacy of black expendability amid racial, economic, and political exclusion.

In March, when Howard pointed out that the exterior walls of homes, propped up on or pushed off of their foundations, had been turned into tombstones by police agencies, funeral markers in the absence of funerals, I had to read again. *Not the absence of agency, agency existed: people were resourceful, found their loved ones, tended the traumatized, buried the dead, worked to rebuild lives and communities.* Radical literacy is not a victim narrative or a mere lamentation; so what was underneath what the police had written on the walls?

I read policing mechanisms that sought to destabilize black agency and autonomy, while constructing graveyards to serve as a staging ground for real estate emptied of "undesirables." So, the NOPD (New Orleans Police Department), the TFW (Texas, Fish and Wildlife), the National Guard, and others spray-painted an acronym, the alleged date of entry into the building, the number of those found alive, the number of dead bodies retrieved, and then encased their quartered codes with a circle to be read clockwise. The deeper we drove into the Ninth, the more painted funeral markers, absent funerals that dignified death, and the longer the wait time before "help" came. The waters came in August 2005, but the state did not, at least for the Ninth Ward. While Howard drove slowly through neighborhoods, I began to see entry dates for the 9th, the 10th, then the 12th months of that year. Mourners from the Ninth Ward would say later that the colorful police tags and graffiti were part truth and part fiction: Police claimed to check homes that they never entered, as unfortunate relatives later discovered when they found unrecognizable corpses.

If the state waits until months after the waters recede, why (claim to) enter at all? Is this a performance of accountability and care? Surely the pretense of rescue takes place on stage, while the concreteness of relief is tossed to private charities or outraged

activists and compassionate individuals or resilient people who claim New Orleans as their own: birthplace, hometown, future. The "rescue" or abandonment of the living and/or the remains of those who met or failed to meet the tests are determined by federal, state, and local entities (tests included makeshift levees, tepid warning systems, early non-mandatory evacuation orders, denial of public transportation out of a flood zone and disaster area, and the militarization of humanitarian relief and social stability).

Perhaps in the private graveyards of homes, or the larger graveyards of the most disenfranchised sector of the city, state officials and employees opted for a "closed casket" approach to human suffering—to not witness or at least claim to have not witnessed. In doing so, public servants repeatedly failed their own test, as well as the test for political loyalty and allegiance they demanded from the literate, despite our varied ideologies, and the illiterate (such failures, at home and abroad, have an impact on national elections).

Half a century after Wells wrote her liberation manifesto, and half a century before we began writing what we discerned was "underneath" Katrina, Till-Mobley had an open casket funeral for her son Emmett. She did so for a reason. Defying the injunction by Mississippi police to keep the coffin sealed, and their lining it with lye to hasten the disappearance of the returning teen—defying even the black mortician, who, against her wishes not to alter the face of a mutilated boy, stitched his mouth closed and removed his severed eyes from the sockets—she made him reappear as political and personal trauma. Miss Till-Mobley placed her son on display and dared the world to punish her for publicly mourning and raging against this assault. If we could watch this—rage and grief turning devoted mother momentarily into outlaw (and later into an icon for national embrace), then we could witness, and participate in, the start of a freedom movement. Months before Miss Rosa sat down, Emmett floated, and then putrid and floating was reclaimed, and resurrected, some say through a mother's love turned to

hate, to galvanize a movement when thousands attended his funeral in Chicago and tens of thousands witnessed him in his casket in the black press.

Perhaps we have been able to look in the casket to see the alien, and wonder why it looks so familiar, so close, despite the nonhuman and terrifying appearance. Some imagine that that mutilated boy's body was and is part of our legacy, our vulnerability, a sign of ancestors, living kin and community, and future born. As well, some pass on that literacy, become the kind of parent or communicator that would bring a child before an open casket and hold their hand while saying "look"—and look with them. To translate trauma into educational development seems a necessity for those designated to social death by dominant elites and political economies and granted a privileged place for premature physical death from governments that neither protect nor serve. To look into a city turned coffin and see more than police or social/drug violence, dysfunctional governments using incompetence to excuse elites of complicity in violent and premature death for disenfranchised communities, is an act of political literacy.[4]

Look into the casket, as the *Jet* photographer did fifty years ago, and then turn trauma (by proxy) into hope and a massive struggle and fight for life and a dignified death. Political literacy and voice require that we look and act. Those floating in waters have voices amplified in an echo chamber built by imperial policies and our own social failings. What is heard is not only disregard for human life, and the proclivity for grave digging, but resistance.

our ground zero

When Kim encourages me to visit New Orleans during spring break in 2006, he tells me early on that New Orleans is "our ground zero." I take my class and watch it disintegrate as I become ill from environmental toxins in the Ninth Ward and shift my attention between the few students who planned to work and contribute and the majority who seek spectacle to

acquire the trophies of trauma tourism. Fight trauma tourism, make mistakes, and realize that you can fly over or touch down (as evident in varied arrays of photo opportunities); and that a class is a microcosmic reflection of a campus, a community, and general society. What is different from fly-over or drop-in trauma tourism, and inept organizing and political factionalism on the ground (which harbor their own forms of narcissism) is to recognize humanity as we witness suffering (our own and others) and recognize that underneath spectacle is a spark where empathy and compassion—not sympathy and charity—function as precursors for radical activism. Which might explain why deep emotions, so difficult to come by and sustain, have a value that exceeds words, even those of transformative literacy.

endnote

1 Ida B. Wells, *Southern Horrors and Other Writings: The Anti-Lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1892–1900*, ed. Jacqueline Jones Royster (Boston: Bedford Press, 1997), 160.

2 Robert Caldwell, "New Orleans: The Making of an Urban Catastrophe," *MR Zine*, December 9, 2005, http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/caldwell120905.html.

3 Wells, *Southern Horrors*.

4 There are always counter-narratives seeking to undermine or question literacy: claims to non-racism as an acquisition that absolves rather than attachments to justice through antiracism as labor against racial supremacy and its genocidal logic. Secretaries of state Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell, copresidents Bush and Dick Cheney inform that the president and government care about (black) people. Reassurances fail as public officials publicly wish for urban ethnic cleansing, fund forced relocation programs, and dispersals turn into disappearance and the denial of the right to return.

The pre-flood time of a black city marked by impoverishment, disenfranchisement, neglect, corruption, police brutality, and social violence, as well as the commoditization of black culture for consumers, has been noted by activists and scholars. During the