correspondents at large
NEW ORLEANS

Sold Down the River

JUDITH JACKSON FOSSETT

in that city foreign and paradoxical, with its atmosphere at once fatal and languorous, at once feminine and steel-hard
—William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936)

Do you know what it means to miss New Orleans
And miss it each night and day
I know I'm not wrong, the feeling's getting stronger
The longer I stay away
. . . . . .
Do you know what it means to miss New Orleans
Since that's where you left your heart
(And there's something more)
I miss the one I care for more than I miss New Orleans
—Louis Alter (music) and Eddie DeLange (lyrics),
"Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans" (1946)

BOMBARDED BY THE DISCOURSE OF "TRAGEDY" FROM MAINSTREAM MEDIA AND GOVERNMENTAL OFFICIALS TRYING TO CHARACTERIZE post-Katrina New Orleans, I decided to reread William Faulkner. Ungluing myself from the computer screen, I hoped to distract myself with a literary version of another tragedy of the South. Faulkner's sense of the city's "paradox" and "foreign"-ness—in the case of this hurricane, the fury of climatic events that inexorably led to incomprehensible effects: much of its citizenry's forced migration, dispossession of property, and denial of the right of return as well as ecological catastrophe—was geographically and culturally resonant.

I thought rereading Faulkner might serve me, not just my students. I was the only member of my family not in the path of Hurricane Katrina besides my sister, but I am nevertheless part of the New Orleans diaspora. Instead, the nine chapters of *Absalom, Absalom!* mirrored as many channels on the major broadcast and cable news networks in the days, weeks, and even months since 29 August 2005, when the projected "storm of the century" led to breaches in three major levees protecting the port city

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and wreaked more typical hurricane damage on the Gulf Coast from Texas to Florida.

Since the start of the storm, the nation and the world have attempted—vainly and earnestly, in wall-to-wall chatter and user-generated content in the blogosphere and on talk radio—to make sense of the images streaming from media outlets, whether still, moving, or satellite, and, therefore, develop a more complex interpretive key to the city in order to unlock the meaning of the hurricane and its aftermath. How to make sense of a city situated on a bluff at a curve of a river that can resemble a lake in its magnitude, a city with a curious natural topography (heavily augmented by human engineering) that resembles a lazy Susan, with its multiple small, bowl-shaped compartments, or, more crudely, a drainless swimming pool (see Kelman)? New Orleans, then, is metropolis as bathtub, without a plug. Katrina opens taps of toxic water, which then stagnated, leaving a ring of scum on buildings around most of the city, a marker of the height of those filthy waters that remains visible even today.

When Faulkner, in *Absalom, Absalom!*, tried to make sense of the effect of the Civil War on those, especially sons, who were yet unborn but still doomed by its legacy, he fashioned a convoluted narrative structure, told from multiple points of view, relating overlapping chunks of the action, with often contradictory results. When the news media in the United States, particularly mainstream outlets, sought to report on what they characterized as a "natural disaster," they seemed to channel one of Faulkner's storytellers—that white, male, omniscient voice—trying unsuccessfully to make a cohesive arc out of a largely human-made, ongoing crisis whose long-lasting impact had been to transform New Orleans into a rural throwback (a "city of darkness" [Rivlin]) without street or traffic lights, its once ubiquitous fast-food chains and all-night gas stations abandoned, its population, now a shadow of itself, rising and resting with the sun's movement, often without basic utilities. I imagined CNN's chief correspondent, Wolf Blitzer, as Mr. Compson (who relates to his son Quentin a story told to him by his own father, a Confederate general), orchestrating coverage from his various reporters in the field. His erstwhile network colleague Anderson Cooper seemed to me a combination of two other narrators, that son Quentin and his college roommate Shreve McCannon, unsatisfied with Mr. Compson's attempt to rationalize an irrational past and on a mission to "dig deeper" and find "the truth" of the catastrophe. Cooper, shedding his professional demeanor at times, was then willing to berate publicly the Louisiana Senator Mary Landrieux for her blindness to the unthinkable horrors before his eyes—that morning, a female corpse in the gutter being eaten by rats.

And as in Faulkner's novel, in the devastation of Katrina issues of race and the legacy of chattel slavery suffuse the atmosphere, palpable but seemingly evanescent, visible but willfully ignored. Just as Faulkner failed to give blacks narrative voice in his novel, so did most of the media in their coverage of Katrina, and in doing so they curiously rendered *Absalom, Absalom!* a prescient text for understanding the miscomprehension of New Orleans post-Katrina. Just as Clytie, mulatto daughter of the obsessed planter and protagonist Thomas Sutpen, is not given her voice in Faulkner's tale, though she is a most vital character, so too did the stranded, mostly black residents of New Orleans (who, Wolf Blitzer lamented, were "so poor and so black") go mostly unheard. Their voices or homemade signs entreating help registered briefly on news cameras panning across the squalor of those left behind. As for Faulkner, the question is not whether Clytie can speak (she does, to Sutpen's sister-in-law Rosa Coldfield) but whether Rosa is capable of comprehending the thoughts, ideas, and wishes of a black woman. Similarly, in the hurricane coverage (with few exceptions), the question is

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not whether the residents left in the squalor of the Superdome and the city's Convention Center or stranded on rooftops can speak but whether the nation is capable of understanding and acknowledging how history, circumstance, and civic neglect forced them there. The nature of willed ignorance—whether Rosa Coldfield's or the mainstream media's—is central to the history of New Orleans.

New Orleans is first and foremost a city built on the back of plantation slavery begun in the early days of the eighteenth century. It is a product of the culture that chattel slavery propagated, maintained, and formed, the political, social, cultural, and topographic basis on which a modern, early-twenty-first-century civic world is built. It is also a metropole profoundly shaped by its history as a colony passed between European powers other than Britain. It is, therefore, a geographic and economic site mediated through a non-Anglo vantage for nearly a century before the Lousiana Purchase of 1803. As a creole entity—reinforcing its New World relation to the Old—the city exists in a miscegenated state, alternately highlighting and obfuscating its racial, social, and cultural hybridity.

It sustained the central markets in the major cash crops sugar and cotton and the largest and most important domestic market in the United States for slaves, the antebellum world's "fossil fuel," whose labors produced the goods (especially sugar and cotton) necessary to a burgeoning global market. The slave trade, with its intricate links to other market pricing (the cost of slaves depended on the price of those cash crops and vice versa), resembles our contemporary market for petroleum—today's most precious fossil fuel. Such fuel, whether extracted two hundred years ago or yesterday, is essential for the processing of staples into products bought and sold.

The dominant historical narrative that omits the complex context of chattel slavery then allows New Orleans its Janus-faced character: on one side of the coin, we see "the Big Easy"—good food, good sex, good times, a place that care forgot, a tourist paradise; on the other, the commercial metropolis at the crowded nexus of the Mississippi River system and the Gulf of Mexico, connecting the forty-eight states to the north with the Caribbean and Latin America, to the south. Under the tourist veneer of po'boy sandwiches, teeming Bourbon Street nightlife, and tours of swamps, plantation houses, and cemeteries is an allied economic infrastructure in agriculture, water transport, and natural resources through which more than fifty percent of the grains harvested in the Midwest move, in which more than twelve percent of the nation's oil and gas refining occurs (the economic and spatial replacement for the dominating sugarcane industry of the ninteenth century), and that receives twenty-five percent of the nation's supply of Chiquita bananas (Gross).

The hurricane also forced the nation and the world to discern the base, structure, and superstructure of one of the oldest cities in the New World, along with the economic system of slavery and the extractive economic model through which the city developed. Like the repressed returning, dual remnants of slavery emerged from Katrina's toxic soup. The whole cloth of racial, socioeconomic, and color caste, as well as post-1945 geographic segregation (despite the city's long history as one of the most racially and ethnically mixed), could be seen. It was juxtaposed with the *idea* of New Orleans as a condition of possibility for the good life that white elites (particularly men) might experience—from the city's founders to aspiring slaveowners to young Will Faulkner to the frat boy Georgie Bush—as they indulged in the plentiful fruits of a New World economy. Without the benefit of this historical and political economic context, New Orleans is betrayed by its unique position in the national imaginary as a metropolis at once raucous and mythic, paradisiacal and seedy, elegant and corrupt. Like Tom in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852),

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whose purchase is transacted aboard a Mississippi riverboat, the city has become a commodity. Like a disobedient slave, New Orleans post-Katrina is construed as the cause of its own destruction, made to pay for revealing the nation's secreted slavery past. The city post-Katrina has been personified as one of those many African American women in search of succor at the Superdome, sold down the river of national domestic policy and debate. Indeed, when visiting the city several weeks after the storm, I kept hearing a popular refrain from diverse voices. Katrina was that "black bitch" who vented her spleen on the city. The genealogy of that "bitch" begins with the female slave on the auction block and, later, the mixed-race concubine at the white-only "quadroon balls," both figures who were prized during the colonial and antebellum periods for their sexual and reproductive labors (and reputed prowess). Her evolution continues in the postbellum period with the French Quarter prostitute at the turn of the twentieth century and finds its most potent embodiment in the contemporary welfare mother, filling the city's derelict public-housing projects with illegitimate children. During the storm, she clung helplessly to nearly submerged rooftops or yelled loudly from the chaos of the convention center. The storm had become a racialized and feminized anthropomorphism, serving up its own black female population as fuel for civic degradation.

The Mississippi River has been harnessed for commerce since European colonization, tying the "American heartland" to the global economy, bringing commodities of every sort to the world. Whether viewed in 1805 or 2005, the river, with its switchbacks and bends, curves as it approaches New Orleans, every manner of water-going vessel riding its current. The French explorer Bienville's decision in the early eighteenth century to locate a colonial hub for the French at the mouth of the Mississippi was a gamble—one dependent on burgeoning forces of global capital that required indigenous extermination, the coerced labor of slaves, and the expropriation of natural resources—which would ultimately yield enormous wealth for the few elites who could harness this immense power.

The bottom of that topographic funnel has always been New Orleans, a metropolitan sieve, catching all the resources extracted and products made and displaying them. It was a city of markets, where nearly anything imaginable could be bought and sold—creole tomatoes, German china, books, Japanese camellias, cotton bales, hogsheads of sugar, slaves and concubines. As the aperture of the funnel, New Orleans was also the hub in a spoke wheel of outlying markets. It was a service economy long before financial discourse coined the term.

Much of the messy legacy of slavery washed away with the failure of the levees—a legacy whose markers existed palimpsestically at best—and the receding waters left a city that had become only trash: personal lives transformed into waste, enough to fill the Superdome hundreds of times over. In the long sweep of political economy, Katrina revealed the conundrum of any city as node in a global capital network: is commerce dependent on metropoles to capture its goods, or do container ships now serve that purpose?

Hurricane Katrina transformed the hypothetical into the actual. A metropolis that once sustained half a million people has been placed on the scale of the enduring touchstones of civic death, destruction, and catastrophe: Dresden; Hiroshima; Pompeii. In this discourse, the most likely result of its rehabilitation could be a new Disneyland, an island of stately antebellum homes and humbler dwellings uptown and a rollicking French Quarter dependent on cheap migrant labor to fuel its service economy of smiles, in the midst of a watery ecological disaster zone—a city more than half of which is neither habitable nor reclaimed and whose former residents are seemingly stateless beings, rendered "evacuees" or "refugees," dispersed and denied a right of return. Is this how a city

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dies (see "Death")? Do New Orleanians disappear? Who will miss the city?

I knew that I missed New Orleans. In the days after the storm, I had become my family's communication network hub and the only member with a broadband connection to the Web. I hoped "Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans" as sung most famously by Louis Armstrong would offer some nostalgic solace through an iTunes download when, two days after the flood began, I set out to decode the deluge of satellite images I downloaded after the levees broke. Armstrong, like his contemporary Faulkner, might be a cultural companion who could help me make sense of life post-Katrina.

Although my grandmother and the rest of my maternal family evacuated New Orleans the day before the eye wall hit, my father and aunt decided to weather the storm in a downtown hotel on Canal Street. It would be several days before we located them and heard their harrowing tale of hotel eviction, car vandalism, and circuitous exit following the old state roads of my father's childhood memories. My grandparents' house stands on what was a plantation that had been annexed to New Orleans in the nineteenth century; the two-hundred-year-old pecan tree in the backyard was one of many in the numerous groves that constituted its orchards. Many in our family were less worried about flooding than the greater likelihood that house would be flattened by that tree.

During what seemed like countless hours on this online odyssey, I hopelessly tried to orient myself by aerial features while searching and singing along with Armstrong. I did not know how to navigate my second home in its digital satellite form, a city rendered in arbitrarily numbered thumbnails. I finally found a familiar sight, the round dome of the Touro Synagogue on Saint Charles Avenue, even as the famous streetcar line was now nearly unrecognizable under strewn tree limbs. And then there it was, our family house. The tree was felled but lying across the street and not on the roof. But by the time I completed my search—having spotted my grandparents' and mother's houses, partially underwater, what I thought was my godmother's house, and what seemed to be my uncle's house and having been, to my absolute terror, unable to identify *any* feature of my father's neighborhood, now completely underwater—DeLange's lyrics were nauseating. I was sick of this compendium of regional clichés rendered through a multisensory filter, with hanging moss and sugar pines, comforting songs of mockingbirds and creole tunes at Mardi Gras, reveries about the sweet smells of oleander and magnolia, and a nostalgic vantage on "that old lazy Mississippi." I knew that oleander ingested would kill you, that tall sugar pines might make good trees for lynching, that some poor soul was being eaten alive by mosquitoes while he had to play that "Creole tune which filled the air" so someone else could enjoy that bayou moonlight. Whether taken straight out of the plantation literary tradition or penned at the lyricist's desk at Disney as the hook for its contemporaneous (but now self-censored) 1946 classic *Song of the South*, the appeal to an iconography of southern memory generally, and of Louisiana memory particularly, overwhelmed me.

As I interpreted digital slices of the city, Louis Armstrong's live rendition of those lyrics revealed that New Orleans as an ideal was already lost. Missing New Orleans—a city built on the paradoxes of wealth and poverty, of caste and color, of invisible, unacknowledged black labor and ostentatious white leisure—required émigrés to leave a piece of their heart there. Was this a form of personal, psychic redress to compensate for the emotional and corporeal damage one might actually suffer being there? Maybe that was why Louis Armstrong ultimately settled and bought his home in Queens. And, in the waning days of August 2005, missing New Orleans required being in a place of relative safety.

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