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Reality Bites Back: Hurricane Katrina, an Interview Poem, and a Memoir

When the Water Came: Evacuees of Hurricane Katrina, by Cynthia Hogue (Photographs by Rebecca Rose). New Orleans: University of New Orleans Press, 2010.

Leaving New Orleans: An Unsettling Tale, by Sally Cole. Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2010.

On Saturday November 1st, 1755, an earthquake followed by a tsunami devastated Lisbon with terrible loss of life in the overcrowded city. Culturally, the shock waves spread over Europe as self-confidence in progress was undermined by this unforeseeable disaster. Immanuel Kant developed a theory of earthquakes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau was confirmed in his dislike and distrust of cities, and Voltaire wrote "Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne" and, more famously, *Candide* in which his hero, despite being saved from the *auto da fe* by the earthquake, is increasingly unable to agree with his tutor's insistence that "all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds." The birth of Romanticism with its horror and admiration at the sublime and terrible, and a sense of human littleness against the mighty forces of nature can be traced back to the cataclysm in Lisbon.

In our world we are bombarded by news of disasters, tsunami, earthquakes, floods, landslides, which, however tragic, rarely shake our sense of the meaningfulness (or meaninglessness) of existence. These tragic events produce familiar reactions—celebrities and politicians rush to the scene, and concerts are given to raise money. The TV footage of people and bodies, twisted metal and broken buildings is also familiar. In media terms, disasters are neatly managed: their coverage lasts about a week, and only if they are very terrible will they will get mentioned again on the end-of-the-year news roundups. The various aid organizations, the Red Cross and Red Crescent, Oxfam, Médecins sans Frontières, appear on the scene, and we write checks and hope for the best. We are, perhaps, reassured that we live in a world where disaster is to some extent at least managed. We have got used to disaster.

But not when it happens on our doorstep, not when it happens in the wealthy west, in America, a country associated with news footage of airplanes filled with aid relief flying out to less fortunate parts. Hurricane Katrina, which devastated Louisiana and Mississippi in August 2005, did, if only quite briefly, disturb complacency and the assumption that should a disaster happen here in America it would get fixed fast. Only it did not. Indeed, given the quite extraordinary degree of callous incompetence displayed initially by the administration of George Bush Jr., one might have expected as a literary response a new *Candide*, but levity, even of a serious, satirical, and philosophical variety is not nowadays considered an acceptable response to tragedy. Famously, in 1949 Theodor Adorno stated that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric," and each time a major atrocity occurs, such as the destructive acts that took place on 9/11, this comment is remembered. Anything that appears to make horrific events the subject of artifice and craft, care over language and the tasteful selection of tropes and figures is feared as trivializing the disaster. How is it possible to be tasteful about that which offends all criteria of taste? How can one aestheticize blood, mud, and death? There is a widespread feeling that the only appropriate response is truthfulness: the film *Hotel Rawanda*, for instance, advertised itself as "the *true-life* story of Paul Rusesabagina, a hotel manager who housed over a thousand Tutsi refugees during their struggle against the Hutu" (my emphasis).

Adorno may, however, have also been responding to deeper cultural impulses, beyond the immediate horrors of concentration camps. Storytelling, spinning unreal fictional tales around events, was, Walter Benjamin wrote around 1936 in "The Storyteller, Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," "coming to an end. . . [M]ore and more often there is embarrassment all around when the wish to hear a story is expressed." For Benjamin also, horrors play their part here, men came back from the First World War "grown silent—not richer, but poorer in communicable experience." However, a further factor in the death of storytelling for Benjamin is the rise of the newspaper and its "dissemination of information" in which it is "indispensable for the information to sound plausible." Benjamin carefully does not write not *true* but *plausible*, the format must convince—and the format is that of "news." Taken together, Adorno's and Benjamin's comments perhaps help one to recognize the ways in which documentary forms have become not merely normative in many areas of reportage, but can be seen as especially impeccable for disasters, as indeed the only way open to us to respond to disasters.

It is no surprise, therefore, that the immediate and ongoing response to Hurricane Katrina has been documentary: Spike Lee's film *The Day the Levees Broke* appeared a year after the hurricane and has been followed by a large number of other documentary film treatments. *Trouble the Water* (2008), a film based around actual footage taken by a young woman who had bought a movie camera shortly before the hurricane, is, as it were, a documentary that includes another documentary inside it. *Trouble the Water* remains one of the best and most moving of the many documentary film responses to Katrina. The unvarnished *look* of a documentary film, its relationship to "news," gives it authenticity, no matter that we know, or should know, that the documentary is as carefully crafted and edited, with images selected and music added, as any other genre. The belief that we are getting the raw material of life has also made the documentary a natural for democracies based on the idea (or myth) that the voices of the people matter. In this form, we see and hear the people: their actual faces, their bodies, and hear their voices in what seems to be unmediated reportage.

In *When the Water Came: Evacuees of Hurricane Katrina*, the poet Cynthia Hogue and photographer Rebecca Rose have collaborated to produce "interview-poems" accompanied by full-page photographs in a semi-documentary form. Hogue is an accomplished poet whose more usual poetic style is personal, meditative, elusive and allusive, and she has always been a writer deeply attuned to pain, physical and mental. Rose is a talented professional photographer who has exhibited widely in the States. Both Hogue and Rose have a personal connections to New Orleans: Rose's parents used to live there, Hogue taught at the University of New Orleans for some years. In this work Hogue has moved far from her usual style, recreating herself as a narrative poet telling other peoples' stories in a series of different cadences and vocabularies. Clearly it is important to Hogue's project and its truthfulness to an extreme lived human experience that her own poetic voice be subjugated to that of other voices. There is an artful artlessness about this project, and the "Authors' Note" on page 126 is interesting and worth pondering. Hogue and Rose acknowledge that their work is "deeply rooted in the documentary tradition," and that "they do not claim to present a single truth or judgment." The aim is, rather, to present a representative or general truth by sharing "the personal experiences of a handful of Katrina evacuees, as individuals representative of many people affected by this tragedy." Clearly, as I am sure the authors would agree, they are on somewhat perilous

ground here as they straddle shifting terrain between art and ethnography. The first might need no actual representatives, the second would need more than twelve. Hogue and Rose describe themselves as "witnesses . . . communicating what we have seen and heard, filtered through our perceptions and aesthetics." The combination of filters, perceptions, and aesthetics certainly means this work is *not* simply documentary or in a direct way a work of witnessing—unless one teases out of that word a sense of legal judgment on the one hand and cry of faith on the other. The very name of the genre, "interview poems," moves one to a space that includes but goes beyond ethnography and towards the style of focused and politicized reporting embraced by, for instance, Christopher Isherwood in *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939), significantly renamed as a play, *I Am a Camera* (1951), and Robert Penn Warren in *Segregation* (1956). In a rather similar move, Rose's photographs are all (exquisite) studies in black and white, a format which is also somehow associated with documentary narratives. No pink blush magnolias, green elephant ears, or creamy camellias here, but a becoming black, white, and grey severity—yet undoubtedly posed, arranged, and artful.

"Interview" poetry in which the poet mingles her/his voice and skills with the conversational voices of others is fraught with issues of personal and intellectual property, which are intrinsic to this semi-documentary mode. In this case, every legal and ethical action was taken, from small but useful payments to participants, to the right of the subjects to withdraw at all and any stage. Undoubtedly, it is both a strength and a drawback of this form that the combination of relying on the voices of others while also giving those voices shape and artistry can seem on the one hand a distortion and on the other an appropriation. In many—perhaps all—cases, the experience of giving the interview and seeing the recorded discourse shaped into flowing lines was enabling and empowering. In this edgy form all these possibilities co-exist, empowerment and distortion, enablement and appropriation. Similarly, Rose's lovely photographs of the debris from the flood, the tarnished mirror on the cover, the broken fragments of pottery, or the images inside of abandoned houses listing amidst the irrepressible foliage of the south could be seen as giving a gloss, the beauty of ruins, to the harsh reality of a smashed home.

The "speaker" of each interview poem is identified by name, job, and present location. Photographs of the speakers accompany the descriptions of their hurricane experiences, as well as photos of places and objects that they refer to. This makes for a very attractive layout

and undoubtedly gives intimacy and authority to each account—these “real” people, whose faces look as though they underwent (dreadful) experiences in these places. However, this identification and intimacy also create problems for the reader, for this reader at least, for if one prefers one poem and one picture more or less than another, one feels faintly guilty, is it the person or the poem one is responding to? If one feels one interview poem is better expressed than another, has striking lines and images, is one judging a poem or a person’s range and quality of expression? Should one not feel equal sympathy for all these real people who have suffered trauma and loss? Perhaps that does not matter: it is part, indeed, of the complexity of the presentation that the reader is tossed to and fro between responding to the actual and the patterned and forced to confront frontiers of art and life with both, as it were, in state of emergency.

Unsurprisingly, but very markedly, the responses as they reach us through the authors’ “perceptions and aesthetics” strongly reflect the ethnicity, degree of educational and social privilege, and wealth of the subjects. If there is a general truth to be drawn from the horrors of this hurricane it is, as we already know, that the poor, be they white or black, were not able to save themselves and that little effective effort was made to save them or effectively rehabilitate them. The contrasts are very stark. The middle class subjects complain about their insurances companies:

. . . I paid
Flood insurance with my mortgage in escrow.
I never saw the paperwork annually,
I thought my agent was
raising the limit with inflation
because I told him to
but he didn’t do diddly.

Another subject notes caustically and aphoristically: Insurance adjusters are the scum of the earth. / They eat their young. / They nickled and dimed us to death.

For the poor however, the situation was incredibly stark:

Honest to God, I did not have \$1
In my pocket or any plan.
I did not have a car (I don’t even drive).

I had my elderly mother,
My 4 kids, youngest was 8 months
And I had 2 diapers for her.

A retired auto-mechanic from the Ninth Ward, wheel-chair bound, describes the horrific situation endured by those who took shelter on the Claiborne over-pass:

That's where we stayed
for seven days
Everyone got diarrhea,
And people with open sores
Got bubbles on their legs.

Another striking difference, perhaps the effect of the editorial and interviewing processes, is the degree to which the less privileged display a political sense of the city of New Orleans and have opinions about why the appalling aftermath took place. The retired auto mechanic, for instance, muses on why it took so long for aid to reach them, ". . . the head of FEMA wouldn't let them / in the city." There was, he says, "a big old power struggle" going on between the governor and the mayor and, he notes, "ain't nobody going to take responsibility." The better-off victims, undoubtedly traumatized and suffering losses, think in terms of getting back money from the insurers, moving to new homes, and starting afresh, often with an element of optimism. A white artist who has relocated to Phoenix plays on the name of her new home, "I am in Phoenix rising / from the wreckage. / Rising / like a phoenix." A black Jazz musician, also relocated to Phoenix is less optimistic:

. . . I was the type of guy
who'd have two gigs on Thursday,
three on Friday, five on Saturday.
Now I have a 12-month lease and no gigs.

Instead of optimism, the speaker displays fatalism and a belief that God has something in store for him. Religion and politics, indeed, characterize the responses of the less financially fortunate who must look to forces outside of their situation for both explanations and help. Dependant on state and federal government aid, they offer intelligent criticism, given little or no help from those quarters they look to

a source of power greater than government, they look to God.

Middle-class subjects, however, show concern with their interiority. The artist cited above for instance, finds "a deep rootedness in myself" and an ability to "reconnect to/my own internal energy." The mother of four, alternatively, who reveals her deep rootedness to place, to a smashed and no longer coherent New Orleans, concludes her interview bleakly:

I think any of us would trade
any charity we got to go back
to August 15, 2005, and warn all our family
that terrible storm would take everything away
from us. But we don't
get those chances.
We get what we get.

The photographs that accompany this interview-poem show the places described by the speaker, the place where she shopped, the church where she got married, christened her children and where she "buried my kin." Images of these quite ordinary buildings strongly intensify the speaker's expressed sense of identity in place, not inside herself, but in customs, practices, and rituals. Destroy these and you destroy a person.

Humor, I have suggested, has little place in modern responses to disaster, but certainly a few of the subjects display that mordant humor which helps one to work through desperate situations. One of the subjects, a Shakespeare professor at the University of New Orleans, wryly describes teaching Shakespeare on-line to the scattered students, "Try to teach a play with characters lost/in a storm—*King Lear*—to hurricane evacuees." Again, self reflexive irony—how dire yet ridiculous my situation is—appears in this collection to be a form of response unique to the middle-class respondents compared to a sometimes listless listing of horrors, discomforts, and disappointments from others interviewed. It is impossible, however, to know how far interactions between interviewed and interviewees produced these differences in response.

A sense of constant emergency, tension, and restless movement characterize Sally Cole's memoir of her life during and after Hurricane Katrina. *Leaving New Orleans: An Unsettling Tale* is indeed unsettling, and about not getting easily resettled after being "unsettled." It is also an exhilarating account that takes one across America and

forwards and backwards in time in a classic description of the lived experience of exile, displacement, and loss. Cole's restless inability to settle and her preference for traveling make this into a one-woman Thelma-and-Louise-style road memoir. The narrative moves between Cole's unsafe and unhealthy FEMA trailer on the edge of a cemetery, to the mountains above Flagstaff where she spent a frozen winter, and to New York and Washington where she stays briefly with her children, but always sets off again. Cole is one of the interviewees in *When the Water Came*, and reading the two accounts together fills in gaps and conveys strongly the sense of a group of interwoven and disrupted lives. Catherine, the UNO professor who also appears in *When the Water Came* (the one who taught Lear), did not leave New Orleans and had eventually to be winched to safety by a helicopter. Concern about Catherine, followed by relief at the news of her rescue, runs through Cole's account.

There are many memorable scenes in Cole's memoir, such as a description of a grave being dug ten yards from her FEMA trailer, finding after the funeral is over a tribute of a (nearly empty) bottle of bourbon by the grave, and later a scatter of quarters (9-10), or waking up to strange sounds in Washington to be told it is the gibbons in the zoo. The very breathlessness of the style, which includes colloquialisms, pages of dialogue, and short acute observations, is certainly effective in conveying the "here and now" of her narrative. However, that "here" and that "now" are constantly changing geographically and temporally so that the overall feeling is restlessness, of short moments snatched here and there of pleasure, of pain, or interest, but nothing coherent, nothing certain or "settled." Cole convinces one that however much she has resettled in Tucson, she will never again truly be at *home*. Above all, however, it is the restless energy of the book that remains with the reader. The very beautifully produced *When the Water Came*, with its thick glossy pages and undoubtedly artistic photographs illustrating the lines of cadenced speech, has something monumental about it just because it is, however semi-documentary, a well executed art work. In contrast, Cole's book, caustic, witty, and also sad, charting a four-year period of unsettled movement and homelessness and a chaotic series of rather pointless journeys, vividly conveys what it meant to have lost one's home, one's moorings, job, friends, habits of a lifetime, and sense of belonging.

Many of the people featured in *When the Water Came* have, like Cole, left the South, and with greater and lesser degrees of success remade their lives elsewhere in America. Taken together, these works

remind us that Hurricane Katrina was not only a disaster which cost lives and caused great misery but also that it created an exodus, a diaspora from New Orleans and the South. No matter how hard the city tourist industry tries to reassure us that *le bon temps* are still rolling and that the Big Easy is still hip, these two works demonstrate how fully the heart was torn from the city, how deep the displacement of families from the South has been, and how bitter the memories are of that hideously mismanaged "natural" disaster. According to newly released data from America's 2010 National Census, New Orleans has lost almost a third of its population in a decade. Figures released this winter (February 1st) put the population at 344,000, which is down 29% on the count of 455,000 in 2000 and substantially lower than the 455,000 estimated population at the time of Hurricane Katrina in August 2005. Some 200,000 people fled the city when Katrina hit; clearly many have never returned. The nature—and ethnicity—of the population has changed too, the census data confirm a shift toward a whiter and richer city, as the population of black people living in New Orleans has dropped from 67% to 60%. New Orleans is now more Harry Connick Jr.'s city than Louis Armstrong's. The age of the population has also changed: the city is home to 44% fewer children than a decade ago. Maybe someday someone will write a new *Confederacy of Dunces*, drowning dunces, a witty, observant, hard-hitting and fully fictional work of art, but right now eye-witness accounts, personal testimony, documentary narration, and as above, the hard data from the Census Bureau, seem (as Benjamin and Adorno would recognize) the only appropriate or possible responses to the on-going rawness of the experience.