

# "The Rack Dislimns": Professing in the Aftermath of Katrina

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## Abstract

This essay focuses on the psychological impact of Katrina's long aftermath and attempts to represent the difficulties of restoring order in one's personal and professional lives after a disaster of such magnitude. Because Richelle Munkhoff and her husband lived and worked in two distinct parts of the devastated area, New Orleans and Hattiesburg, Mississippi, the essay addresses the conflicting experiences of recovery in both places by drawing on *Antony and Cleopatra*, and particularly upon the incommensurability of Antony's Egypt and Rome. Narrating trauma, the essay suggests, can be neither linear nor complete; too great a breakdown in language and communication occurs. Ultimately, again drawing upon *Antony*, the essay shows how "the rack" is powerfully connected to the mutability of epistemology — how what we think we know and see can be radically altered by the natural force of clouds.

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On 30 August 2007, the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* published a short article suggesting that a memorial bearing the names of Katrina's victims in New Orleans may never be built (Maggi 2007). A memorial is indeed planned, originally intended for completion by the third anniversary in 2008,<sup>1</sup> but naming the dead is complicated by several factors: numerous people remain missing, and many bodies are still unidentified,<sup>2</sup> no single agency has been assigned responsibility for collecting the names,<sup>3</sup> and — not least — the complexities of precisely defining the scope of the "aftermath." Officials with the Orleans Parish coroner's office, whose jurisdiction covers the area of highest mortality, decided to consider deaths before 1 October 2005 as potentially related to Katrina in order to account for the traumas of evacuation and displacement, as well as the storm and flood.<sup>4</sup> Yet as anyone with experience of the devastated areas knows, the aftermath has a much longer reach, both temporally and spatially. Displaced people who died after the first of October in places all over the country, and more personally, acquaintances who committed suicide in late 2005, a colleague who suffered a massive heart attack in 2006 — these too are Katrina's victims. For logical

yet difficult reasons, these people will never be publicly recognized among the official dead.<sup>5</sup> But the experience of Katrina's aftermath is not logical, and as with all trauma, one does not endure it in the neat narrative pattern of beginning, middle, and end.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, when I offer up an introductory paragraph in a recognizable academic manner — establishing a detached voice, making cogent connections, and buttressing my position with research, complete with footnotes — I am not accurately representing my experience. Indeed, I am left with a painful disjunction between my scholarly self and a personal imperative to represent life after Katrina as truthfully as possible. So let me tell it again: during the fraught second anniversary of the storm, I read a *Times-Pic* article about the lack of an official death count in New Orleans and was stunned to learn that the "[Coroner's] office still can't identify more than 80 bodies and is awaiting the results of DNA testing at a Shreveport lab to do so" (Maggi 2007). Following the thread further informed me that 595 people are still listed as missing, and that those eighty-four bodies with the Orleans Parish Coroner are each recorded as John/Jane Doe.<sup>7</sup> Even now, my bodily reaction is nearly to vomit, to weep, to clench my teeth. Almost three years later, and there are human remains that we have not bothered to examine sufficiently to categorize by gender, let alone to determine identity.

How could there be eighty-four people for whom no one is clamoring? For some, this may be another example of the inequities of race and class Katrina exposed to the nation, that certain folks have been denied humane treatment in death, even without the excuse of immediate catastrophe. Certainly it seems unjust when compared, for example, with 9/11 victims, whose names have been read aloud to mark the first and subsequent anniversary commemorations.<sup>8</sup> Others, those with experience battling the bureaucracies of any kind in the new New Orleans, may suspect that numerous people are indeed clamoring, in Kafkaesque conditions, to no avail.<sup>9</sup> For myself, encountering the fact of eighty-four John/Jane Does also made visible a professional existential crisis about one's complicity in the silences and erasures of history. But this comes later in the story.

So I must back up and start again. When Sharon O'Dair asked me to participate in the September 2007 Hudson Strode Symposium on "Shakespeareans in the Tempest" at the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa, she graciously asked for a paper that addressed how Katrina changed my teaching and professional life, and more particularly, how Shakespeare mattered in the aftermath. I was honored by the request to address these questions, but then was stymied in my attempts to articulate my experience. How could I narrate what happened to my professional self without explaining and exposing my personal self? How could I write a "scholarly" paper, or even a personal account, without implying that these events have concluded, and that I have reached a place from which I can

look back and objectively comment, structure, analyze? Ay, there's the rub: that somehow I could be a traveler returned from that bourn, one capable of describing the mysteries of the undiscovered country. There are degrees of remove from the epicenter of trauma, but there is no return. And although it may not be professional to admit this, for most of that first year after, Shakespeare did not matter very much.

In preparing the presentation, I drew on many conversations with people who went through — are still going through — Katrina.<sup>10</sup> We can talk seemingly endlessly, trading stories, laughing at absurdities, weeping at something that still overwhelms. These stories must be told for a variety of reasons — to present a more accurate picture of what actually happened, to offer lessons in how to prepare for disasters that seem to be occurring with greater frequency and magnitude, to heal, and to form community with others of like experience. Yet at the same time, it is very difficult to articulate to others the *meaning* of the storm, its emotional impact, its scale, its longevity. Put bluntly, Katrina changed everything. Breaking that statement down into meaningful sentences and coherent paragraphs, however, is a challenge. I started with note cards, jotting down ideas, topics, moments I wanted to use as examples, as "evidence" — in good scholarly fashion — for my argument. But as I arranged and re-arranged my raw experience (a term I never fully appreciated before), I was struck by the randomness, incoherence, and insufficiency of my evidence, which seemed increasingly like bad poetry: "crossing the bridge," "strand of pearls," "except for *Titus*," "the statue last spring." Certainly I could expand and string these into a narrative; after all, that is what we have been doing since the storm — telling each other our stories and trying to tell others pieces of the story that might shed light on, dispel, or reinterpret what they saw on CNN. Narrative has been a necessity, but it also has its limits, especially in a scholarly forum. Most disturbingly, this version of my story will be fixed in time — a temporal fact at the very antithesis of Katrina's powerful aftermath. In what follows I offer a glimpse into my experience, pieces of evidence that point toward larger implications. Yet academic discourse and training also fail me; I cannot offer you a thesis, an intellectual package neatly tied up. Rather, for me, to try to articulate what the storm represents is to inhabit a place without linear structure, without formal coherence.

In trying to express the indescribable, as Clare Moncrief shows so beautifully in her essay, those of us so inclined can turn to Shakespeare and draw on his language to give shape to our own. As I thought about what passage best begins to capture for me the experience of the storm and its aftermath, I kept alighting on one that provides an evocative image of epistemological incoherence, linked specifically to a dissolution of identity represented through a conceit of clouds. Toward the end of *Antony and Cleopatra*, after devastating loss, Antony laments to Eros:

Sometime we see a cloud that's dragonish,  
 A vapor sometime like a bear or lion,  
 A tower'd citadel, a pendant rock,  
 A forked mountain, or blue promontory  
 With trees upon't that nod unto the world  
 And mock our eyes with air. . . .  
 That which is now a horse, even with a thought  
 The rack dislimns, and makes it indistinct  
 As water is in water. . . .  
 My good knave Eros, now thy captain is  
 Even such a body. Here I am Antony,  
 Yet cannot hold this visible shape. (4.14.2-14)

This image depicts for me the most crucial aspects of life in the immediate aftermath, most obviously in the link Antony makes between "the rack" and the fragility of identity. What we think we are, what we think we know or see, "even with a thought / The rack dislimns, and makes it indistinct / As water is in water."<sup>11</sup> Faced with this kind of dissolution, what I hope to offer in this essay are moments of insight, a kaleidoscope of experience that can only gesture toward coherence, closure. Thus, in the way Antony describes "A vapor sometime like a bear or lion" — as the clouds dissolve and reconstitute, one image morphing to the next — I find for myself a metaphor for the form of this essay — one not linear, and in some ways, not unlike the structure of the hurricane itself. In what follows I will circle around the issues of identity and community, teaching and professional life, trauma and art, offering vaporish glimpses into things that, for me at this vantage point, still do not quite hold visible shape.

Cross-cutting that swirling, "dislimn-ing" structural form, however, is another aspect I find useful in invoking *Antony and Cleopatra*: setting, or, more precisely, *settings*. In August 2005, I was a resident of both New Orleans and Hattiesburg, Mississippi, a college town about sixty miles north of Gulfport. My husband, William Kuskin, worked at the University of Southern Mississippi, and I, at Tulane. For an academic couple, two jobs within 115 miles of each other — well, we counted ourselves lucky. The psychological and cultural distances between Mississippi and New Orleans, however, are far greater than geography suggests, and thus you can perhaps begin to see why I want to invoke Antony's Rome and Egypt. Even before the storm, it was difficult to inhabit both simultaneously. I do not have the space here to dispel assumptions you might have about Mississippi, or New Orleans, for that matter; suffice it to say that, like Antony, I love both

places, but they are fundamentally distinct.<sup>12</sup> After the storm, the boundaries between the two hardened, became exaggerated, and in some ways even blurred. To explain what I mean, I first need to tell you some of my story of the storm. Many accounts of Katrina, including some in this issue, are harrowing stories of trauma and fortitude under extreme physical conditions. My hurricane experience was more ordinary, and so my role is to articulate the immense psychological trauma of the aftermath.

### "Mock our eyes with air": The Beginning of the Aftermath

Although in recent years we had lived primarily in New Orleans, in June 2005 my husband became Chair of his department, and it was clear we were all going to be spending more time in Hattiesburg. We decided to buy a house there, and thus it was that at 6 pm on Friday, August 26 — less than three days before the storm — we were handed the keys to our new house. No one in the title company's office that evening had any inkling that a hurricane was crossing into the Gulf, an issue we were to confront continually in the coming months, as insurance companies normally refuse to write new policies under these circumstances.<sup>13</sup> As William was on his way to New Orleans Saturday morning to pick up his beloved motorcycle from a repair shop near the Superdome, the shop owner called and told him not to come into the city, as people were beginning to evacuate and "contraflow" was going into effect, which meant that all roads would shift to outbound traffic only. The speed at which Katrina developed surprised almost everyone. When I'd left work on Thursday afternoon, stopped at the bank to get our check for the title company, and driven up to Hattiesburg with an overnight bag, I had no idea that Katrina would soon become a major hurricane heading right toward us. It did not cross my mind that I would not see my home for nearly a month, that I would not be allowed back into my office at Tulane until late December, and that I would never be inside my bank again.

With less than forty-eight hours to prepare for the arrival of a major storm, we thus found ourselves in a house empty except for a folding table and chair, a futon, and a newly delivered refrigerator. Not exactly "hurricane preparedness," but we weren't too worried. Our first hurricane experience, Georges in 1998, had set the bar for us: in Hattiesburg, we lost power for four days, and the amount of rainfall was more dangerous than the winds; I had roasted a chicken and baked a lasagna which lasted as long as our ice did, our bathtub filled with water had not been necessary, and clean-up had been minimal. None of the storms that had threatened us in New Orleans in the years since (Isidore, Lili, Ivan) had offered up anything worse. So as we squeezed into Walmart with the rest of Hattiesburg, we felt confident stocking up with a four-day supply of water, batteries, candles, and canned stuff (since we had nothing to cook with), and the necessary ordinary things we

didn't have with us: a flashlight, a can opener, a deck of cards.<sup>14</sup> That's where we were on Sunday night, August 28, ready to wait out the storm. Really: sixty miles inland, how bad could it be?

When she arrived on Monday, Katrina slowly followed the Interstate 59 corridor straight up through Mississippi. Our electricity went out at 8 am. We later learned that the main power plants to the south of us had been inundated by the storm surge, but at the time it still seemed to be a "normal" hurricane — sheets of rain gusting down empty streets. The wind increased, and the storm pummeled. Hundreds of trees fell in our neighborhood alone. First the older water oaks toppled — they are tall with shallow root systems. We had a beautiful one in front of the new house, a huge tree that looked impervious to anything. Sometime in the late morning, our daughter, who had been glued to the window all day, said, "Daddy, will that tree fall?" To which my husband responded, "No, honey, that tree has been there at least a hundred years, it's not going anywhere." He had not even finished his sentence when we could see that it was coming down — straight for us. Its fall was absolutely silent, followed by a soft sucking sound as the roots surfaced, the violence of it strangely gentle. The trunk clipped the porch, landing less than ten feet from where we were sitting. Because the roof held, we were protected, left with a beautiful green canopy of branches. When the city measured the root ball later, it came in at 13.9 feet across.

As the eye neared us in the early afternoon, the winds grew even stronger, and the pine trees started snapping. These are tall, skinny trees, with branches only high above rooftops — they looked as if someone was wringing their necks. We'd see them twisting, and then hear a loud pop as a tree exploded in its midsection, the top slamming to the ground. The local news reported at the time that it was still a Category 3 hurricane when the eye passed, with winds between 111 and 130 mph.<sup>15</sup> Trees that had withstood the morning onslaught began to snap and fall once the winds began to slam them from the opposite direction. Four enormous pines flattened the house across the street from us; somehow the people inside were not hurt.

That evening, as people began to venture out, we were stunned by the scale of damage: buildings crumbled in the old downtown, dangerous debris everywhere, roads impassable. And this was just our little Hattiesburg — what we saw there was soon to be eclipsed by the vast scale of damage to our south. All of us tried to register what the local newscasters were saying: services and infrastructure had suffered tremendous structural damage; we should expect no electricity for at least a month, water would be off indefinitely; there were no working phones, our New Orleans cell phones were useless; a dusk to dawn curfew was established and rigorously enforced. Oh, and after the first evening, a thick hot humidity settled itself to stay; we would have no rain for months. Dear Reader, I want you to stop and think about what is in your household cupboards right now. How

long could you feed your family, pets, or neighbors without access to food and water other than what you have stored today? Do you have a grill? A camp stove? Fuel? How would you maintain personal hygiene with water so precious? How far could you drive with the gas you have in your tank right now? As you answer and then begin to worry, consider now that *everyone* in your town, city, region is also frightened by these questions — that everyone in a geographical area the size of Great Britain is terrified by them. Now imagine the extreme physical and psychological distress of those hundreds of thousands of people who lost their houses completely — washed away in the surge or flood, or submerged for weeks, relatively whole in appearance, but rotting and devoured from within by mold.

When the news came first about the storm surge on the Coast, and then about the broken levees and flooding in New Orleans, it was impossible to process any of it.<sup>16</sup> Instead, we did what people in disasters zones do: we concentrated on the immediate emergencies of the people right in front of us. Neighbors to check on and commiserate with, tarps to be raised to cover damaged houses, and then, as roads began to be cleared by those locals with chainsaws, friends to help, debris to clean up. Tuesday was a continual series of body blows as the scale of damage was revealed in personal terms: the houses of two friends in Hattiesburg suffered tremendous damage, crushed by fallen trees; several friends and colleagues who lived near the beach between Biloxi and Bay St. Louis realized their homes were lost completely in the surge; other friends waited anxiously to hear from family who had not evacuated areas near the coast that normally were safe, but this time not. In this environment of fear and stress, communal eating instantly became the norm, as people cooked up the contents of their fridges and freezers. The owner of a restaurant hosted a neighborhood feast, passing plates of shrimp and salmon steaks to anyone passing by. Sitting in near darkness, in extraordinary sweltering silence, amongst strangers, passing acquaintances, and close friends, eating food from one of Hattiesburg's fanciest bistros off of paper plates, we faced the fact that life as we knew it was over for the foreseeable future. And we reacted as much of Mississippi did, to do our little part to restore order, with strategic goals and collective effort. In many ways, the saddest part about what happened in New Orleans is that with evacuation and the scale of destruction, these kinds of community bonds were fractured, sometimes severed.

Thus, on Wednesday morning — the second day after the storm — we formed a five-car convoy and headed for Birmingham, Alabama to get the vulnerable to civilization and to stock up on provisions. Our friend's elderly parents had weathered the storm in their home near the coast, but now had to be evacuated out of the primitive conditions that life in the aftermath promised; other friends, ones who had lost their house in Gulfport, had a new baby who was not holding up well in

the heat, and they too needed to be ferried beyond Hattiesburg since it had nothing to offer in the way of respite. We, with our few canned goods and little water, needed to procure more substantial supplies, including things necessary for the massive clean-up: a chainsaw, gasoline, rakes, garbage bags, more protective shoes and clothes. We set off: only one lane of I-59 was open all the way to Meridian, ninety miles to the north, because of downed trees. Streaming down the opposite direction were Navy rescue boats and electric company trucks from Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee, and points beyond. The single lane turned a three-hour journey into six; signs of destruction were evident everywhere, and indeed, electricity had only just been restored north of Meridian, with some parts of Alabama still without power. In Birmingham, the elderly parents were settled with their son, while the couple with the newborn was able to get gas and continue on to relatives in Atlanta. We stayed with family of friends, who kindly took in four adults and three children without blinking.

Waiting for us there, after much welcome showers, was an email from my brother with a satellite photo of New Orleans he'd zoomed in on, showing water four blocks from our house, but our street dry. Impossible to tell if there might be other damage — fallen trees, battered roof — or if it had been looted, as many businesses were on the blocks near us.<sup>17</sup> Other immediate uncertainties were resolved: would the ATM card work, given that our money was in a local bank in New Orleans? Miraculously, yes. Was I still employed? The President of the university appeared on one of the morning shows, and it appeared that yes, because I was on the tenure track, I was — for now.<sup>18</sup> Other questions pressed intensely, but could not be answered: what was happening to those people not in tenure-stream positions? Would Tulane even remain viable as an institution? And more personally: were friends, colleagues, acquaintances safe? Unless you had a telephone number or email that did not involve New Orleans, there was no reaching anyone. We contacted our immediate family members, all of whom live outside the region, and gave them lists of friends elsewhere to phone so that people would know we were safe. We managed to leave a message for our closest friends from New Orleans at their relatives' home in central Louisiana. For everyone else, we had to wait and hope. Numb to our own good fortune, stunned as we were by the cable news coverage we could now see, all we could do was to focus on the task at hand: get our two truck-loads of provisions back to Hattiesburg.

### "Indistinct / As water is in water": Dislocations and Fluid Boundaries

September through December was a period of swirling incoherence punctuated by snapshots of clarity, either as emblems of chaos or as glimpses of "progress," for lack of a better term. My initial sight of the destruction south of Hattiesburg was not my own; my husband was the first to



venture out, to Gulfport as part of his job,<sup>19</sup> and to New Orleans to check on our house. Surreal was the vast stretch of destruction all along the Mississippi coast, looking, as many have described it, as if a nuclear bomb exploded. Cars in trees, debris thrown up and sucked back by the ocean, washing miles of land clear except for a few trees and foundations. Here is one of the hardened differences between Mississippi and New Orleans: the surge's stripping of the coast versus the long stewing of the city in the floodwaters. And for much of September, New Orleans was nearly empty, under quarantine, barricaded with military checkpoints. Nevertheless, on September 17, William talked his way past the soldiers on River Road and entered the quiet city. We had planned to go together, but I could not face witnessing a dead New Orleans. And, silly as it seems now, I dreaded leaving our daughter 115 miles behind because the sense that anyone could be pulled away by uncontrollable currents — both literal and figurative — remained chillingly present.<sup>20</sup> The disorientation of silence after chaos: it was like a post-apocalyptic science fiction movie, and was even two weeks later when I returned. You knew what had happened — the levees broke, and the city flooded. But everywhere small vignettes presented themselves and cried out for interpretation. The mind wants to, tries to, produce order out of the stimulus it receives, but it was painfully impossible to do so.

Thus for me, the months after Katrina are marked by the trauma of commuting between Mississippi and New Orleans —two hours each way if I was lucky — of witnessing again and again the vast scope of destruction, punctuated by some small emblem of horror and compounded by my inability to interpret, to read. I don't think that I can yet articulate how damaging that is to one's psyche. The first time I crossed the newly reopened (single) twin span, there was some huge dead thing — a horse? a cow? — washed up in the median. Abandoned cars with their doors open, boats, garbage, water bottles stacked neatly on a concrete piling along the highway. What happened here? Why did they leave the door open? Whose water is that, and why didn't they need it? Anywhere I looked was a tableau of some inscrutable story; my mind was always struggling to make sense of what could not be understood. Driving to and from, I watched the tableaux, how long they remained, as a way to gauge recovery. The horrific dead thing: a couple of weeks. The car dangling in the bayou down past Crowder Avenue: I think it was summer before it vanished, and for all I know it finally just fell in the water and sank. And then there were the things not there: birds, and of course, people. It was months before I saw any birds.

After crossing the bridge going south, you drive through a long stretch of nature preserve, the Bayou Sauvage. We all know the watermarks on the houses, but one of the most heartbreaking sights was the watermark on the landscape of that Bayou — some toxic sludge leaving a line as

far as the eye could see, along with the dead grasses, shrubs, trees. Moving along on I-10 toward the city, you come to the neighborhood known as New Orleans East, which even two years after the storm remained forlornly desolate. The day in December I saw my first FEMA trailer there, I cried, because in my commute I knew that just south of Hattiesburg a huge field of FEMA trailers — hundreds of them — had been waiting to be delivered for months, since September. Two years later, as I was driving up I-59 to attend the Tuscaloosa symposium, that field still had about fifty trailers — waiting for the next storm, I guess.

If destruction knew no boundaries between New Orleans and Mississippi, one line suggesting Shakespeare's Rome and Egypt was sharply drawn. For me crossing the bridge, the broken twin span over Lake Pontchartrain, was a move from order, or attempted order, to chaos. By the time I began to go down to the city regularly in the beginning of October, the twin span had been mended enough for traffic to travel in both directions over one span, but doing so was precarious; it felt like I was driving my car on planks across a creek. This was nothing compared to the experience of traversing the thin metal plates that made up much of the other span once it was repaired and reopened in January. The posted speed limit was 35 mph because the vibrations from traffic jarred the bolts loose, and one lane was closed daily in order for workers to go out with wrenches to tighten the bolts by hand. Did this fact stop drivers from flying across at over 70 mph? No, instead the bridge marked the beginning of the Wild West, as New Orleans became in those months. Rules were out — with few cops and no working stoplights, amid the rest of the chaos, it was every vehicle for itself. And because much of the traffic entering the city was devoted to construction and repair, what screamed along the bridge and into the city were mostly large trucks and trailers with equipment, a dangerous free-for-all.

Crossing the bridge also signaled a psychological transition, made audible by radio reception. Mississippi Public Broadcasting, the public radio station, was an excellent resource in the days, weeks, and months after the storm. It offered an organized system of relaying information to listeners about any number of needs and the means to meet them: when and where services like food and ice distribution might be found; when interviews with various public officials would be broadcast and what information they would be providing; and later, in-depth programs dealing with all aspects of recovery, from dealing with FEMA to helping plants recuperate. Crossing the bridge meant losing MPB and finding the only functioning station in New Orleans: WWL talk-radio and the booming voice of local personality Garland Robinette. Everything I have heard or read about WWL in the aftermath describes it as a lifeline, and in a world of silence, I can understand the power of such a voice. But in October and November, the station symbolized for me the deeply shocking incoherence of recovery in New Orleans. I would lose MBP as they were outlining exactly

where state mobile units would be that day, offering, say, housing assistance or resources for the unemployed. The next minute I would hear Robinette beg for anyone listening to please call in and let everybody know where the Red Cross was handing out meals that day. A lifeline, yes, but one haphazard and contingent. More often, Robinette barked into the microphone, the broadcast a long rant about immediate frustrations or the failures of public officials, like the Governor of Louisiana, whom I once heard call in to defend herself. What resulted was not an organized or useful exchange of information, but something little short of a screaming match. Cathartic perhaps, but not very reassuring.

If the line between the two stations' approach to communication was stark, interpersonal communication also failed, sometimes at the most basic level and other times, more difficult to bear, among acquaintances and friends. Indeed, the entire region was suffering from a crisis in language. From the breakdown of spelling to the realization that there are things that cannot be said, language comes under intense pressure in disaster, and bluntly, it doesn't always work. Incorrect spelling or word use seems an absurdly trivial detail, but the scale of it suggested to us that the brain, under intense conditions, simply does not function properly. Neighbors around the corner from us in New Orleans had spray-painted this message on their fence in the immediate aftermath: "Welcome 'Dry land Resort' Open to any resque worker police & anyone who will help. Come with a good attitude & we will when the superbowl." When the Saints will win the Superbowl is an open question, but the short-circuiting evident here by our completely literate neighbors is telling. Trust me when I say that all of us were, and sometimes still are, misusing our words and letters along similar lines. Failure of communication is thus not simply a matter of downed phone lines or silent radio signals, but that language itself malfunctions.

The very hardest failures of language occurred when they could not even be acknowledged during direct exchanges between speakers one would expect to be sympathetic. In early November, for example, Stephen A. Nelson, a colleague in the Department of Earth and Environment Sciences at Tulane whose research focuses on disasters, offered to take interested faculty members on a tour of the levee breaches to help us understand what had happened.<sup>21</sup> There were about eight of us that day; most had been back in New Orleans for less than a week, so they were still in shock at the extent of destruction. At one point, as we were viewing a swath of neighborhood stripped bare by retreating water, I observed how similar it looked to the Mississippi coast. A colleague, actually an acquaintance, turned to me and snapped: "what happened in Mississippi didn't really affect anyone, I mean it was mostly second homes." I felt like I had been punched in the gut, so stunned and hurt I could not respond, but later I marveled at such a precise moment of the fracturing of community.

We were in it together, and we weren't. People, rational people, highly educated people, dissented over who had it worst; Louisianans complained that Mississippi was unfairly given more financial assistance (because of the Republican governor's ties to the Bush administration); Mississippians protested that national news coverage focused almost exclusively on New Orleans, giving their predicament short shrift. It was a clear line in the sand, another hardened boundary between Egypt and Rome: either you were part of the recovery in the city, or part of it on the coast. To try to be part of both was a bit like becoming a spy, a position of suspicion on both sides, not fully a member of either.

It was, at times, no easier with close friends. When the city opened up again in early October, people slowly began to return, often men who had left wives to tend the children enrolled in faraway schools. Chris Rose, a columnist for the *Times-Picayune* who became the spokesman for the collective experience of the aftermath, captured this moment in a piece he called, "The Elephant Men," which reads in part:<sup>22</sup>

Every night, we gather on my front stoop. . . . Yeah, we are men without their women. Women without their men. Parents without their children. . . . We often deal with First-Timer Syndrome. As my immediate neighbors trickle back to town, one by one — either just to clean up and move on or to move back in for good — they generally end up on my stoop. And they often cry. It's the first time they've been back to town and they are shaken to their very core at what they've seen and smelled and we grizzled veterans of this war try to provide shelter from their storm. (Rose 2007, 48-49)

On my block, the seven individuals representing each household — six men and me — returned almost at the same time, the first week of October. We weren't stoop sitters, but were more likely to gather in the street in twos and threes, greeting, commiserating, witnessing. Even the man on the corner, whose house looked abandoned before the storm and whose name I never knew because he was never to be seen, came running out with a big smile and raised arms when he first saw me; we rejoiced that his six cats, whom I knew well, had made it through the storm and flood safely. But in those early months, I generally did not spend the night: too eerie, quiet, and dark. Although electricity was restored in our neighborhood, most of the city remained without, and would for many months. It wasn't that I felt unsafe; Mr. Noble across the street and Dan next door to him had between them an arsenal and a keen instinct worthy of our post-apocalyptic setting. Phil, my neighbor to the right, had returned with his three dogs, and they had always been our alarm system. No, it was the feeling of alienation and the pain in my throat that kept me commuting back to Hattiesburg. You didn't have to be in the city long before you would feel a burning sensation as

you swallowed; this was quickly dubbed "Katrina cough." Medical opinion declared it harmless, but similar assurances of safety had been proven wrong after 9/11.

That is the setting, then, for the conversation you cannot have with your closest friends as they move back into the city with their children in late October, when the first private schools opened their doors. One time you can say, "Aren't you at all worried about what's in the air or what's in the ground now?" And one time you can hear, "They say Katrina cough is nothing, but we're not letting the kids help clean up outside." The rest is silence. You are proud of their pioneering resilience and worried about their health; they are respectful of your choices and worried about you too, but there is no ability or time to talk about consequences. A future past the immediate concerns of recovery seems remote, almost impossible. We need blue tarps and roofers; workers to repair damaged walls, windows, gas lines; equipment to replace A/C systems, ruined electrical wiring; we need to remove dead plants and trees and figure out how to make things grow again. And we need to help those who have lost more than we have.

In doing so, we hear a lot of stories: horrible, amazing, cruel, sad, even funny sometimes. And these stories become us too, but they cannot be told because they are not ours and because they often reach to depths of pain and sorrow that are still too near. Part of the psychological impact of Katrina's devastation, they seem to me to be off-limits in a forum such as this. Yet if we don't speak of these most raw places, will you think they don't exist? Let me tell you this: *everyone* I know who went through Katrina, at some point during the storm itself or in its long aftermath, faced their worst nightmare. One example I can give: a friend who was going through a contentious custody battle sent her children on a scheduled visit with their father — Friday, August 26; like us, she had no idea a hurricane would blow her world apart within a few days. She was unable to locate her children and had no idea of their whereabouts for over two weeks. In the end, they were safe and sound, and reunited — but those weeks remain in her soul. And for many other people I know, it has not been the case of facing the nightmare, but of living it.

### "Ask me not what I know": Professing in the Aftermath

At some point during that fall, a former student sent me an email from New York, raving about a production of *Measure for Measure* that she'd seen — doing something radical, I can't remember what. I wrote back that it sounded terrific, but that I couldn't remember the plot of *Measure* — only partly joking. Of course, I immediately got a reply dutifully summarizing the play for me. She hadn't understood my meaning — not only was the plot of *Measure* so irrelevant to me that my brain could not conjure it up, but more significantly, in the larger scale of events, what was *Measure* to me or me to *Measure*? Life might be going on normally elsewhere, but it was not so

for me or anyone around me, and while I wasn't going to dwell on it, I also was not going to hide that fact. This, in essence, was my relation to teaching and professional life for much of the first two years of the aftermath.

Strange indeed it is not to be able to enter one's own office — to walk out one afternoon and be unable to return for four months. Although I could drive by the campus, it was guarded by men with machine guns, visibly displayed, who refused entry to anyone. I'm sure you've heard New Orleans described as a war zone; to see your campus under militarized protection, the enemy so indistinguishable that it includes you, is deeply shocking and alienating. Apparently one day in October, each of the relatively undamaged buildings was briefly open, but because I had limited internet access at that point, I didn't know about it. And really, dashing in to retrieve some books would not have changed anything. Being abruptly severed from everything that orders your world — work, friends, neighbors, the people you don't really know, but who figure in daily life: Lou, who made great scrambled eggs at our local cafe; Miss Orlando, who'd cut our daughter's hair ever since she had hair; the man whose name I can't remember (John?), who came by about once a month, asking for potatoes or a carrot to add to his pot that day — is an amputation that takes tremendous effort and skill to overcome.

When finally I entered my office in late December, I walked in, looked around, and wondered, "Who is this person?" I stared at the mess; the furniture was shoved in all directions, everything disrupted. Someone had tried to clear the area near the window, perhaps because just across the alley was the burned-out shell of a house, destroyed by a gas explosion sometime after the storm. I did a minimal tidying up, made a note of what was stolen — because, despite the machine guns, stuff was stolen — but I don't think I moved a piece of furniture all semester. After four months of living in a world where every waking minute was devoted to the reestablishment of order, I had no energy left to try to put things right here, so I just left them where they were. I did decide to sit with my back to the window because I couldn't stand the sight of the charred remains of the pretty pink mansion, not on top of the 115 miles of devastation. But I didn't turn the desk around, I just rolled my chair to the back and used it with the drawers facing the wrong direction.

It wasn't until I was able to get into my library carrel, which took a while longer because that building had suffered flooding, that I felt some missing part of me spark again. It was eerie, because despite the damage to the basement and main floor, my little room remained exactly as I had left it — the calendar on the wall showing August, notes spread around, a book propped open, marking where I'd left off. "Oh, this is me" went warmly through my mind; I felt like an amnesiac who remembers some glimmer of what's been lost shimmering through the cloudiness of the mind. But I never went back to my carrel until it was time to pack it up for the move. This

might be me, but I had no time for it — not with the extra teaching to replace the fired adjuncts and graduate students, with the commute, with sorting out the insurance, the contractors, the roofers. As I think about it now, I may have been afraid to touch one thing in that room, as if by doing so the whole skeleton would collapse, leaving me with no trace, no map of how to get back to where, and who, I was before.<sup>23</sup>

Teaching that semester took everything I had no reserves of or belief in: energy, memory, a sense of order and progress. The first day, I walked into my Shakespeare class — first wondering why these parents had let all of these kids come back here and then banishing that thought — and expected to do what I always do, give my spiel: a brief biography, an overview of the class. The usual. I couldn't do it; I couldn't even remember Shakespeare's dates — I could just see in my mind a cloudy spot where I knew that information should be, but I had no access to it. I couldn't even recover to give some kind of cheesy "mid-sixteenth century to early-seventeenth century." Nope, nothing. I think I ended up just going around the room, asking them what they'd done, where they'd been. But I'm not really sure; much of that semester, and our "Lagniappe" semester, squeezed into May and June and meant to catch up for the canceled fall, are a complete blur. What does stay with me is a deep sense of the local students, who at that time did not constitute a large percentage of Tulane's student body. In my first-year writing course, I had two students from Chalmette and one from New Orleans East, both areas ravaged by the storm; I knew they'd come to try to put definition in their lives, to their futures — to try to get back on some kind of track. It was a painful struggle for them, as it was for me, to balance the pressures of reconstituting one's life with the seemingly bizarre requirements of college. The student I remember most is the one who stopped coming mid-semester. I could not help him, save him; I could barely help myself.

No resources were available for faculty whose jobs had suddenly become something closer to social worker or counselor than, say, professor of literature. Our mandate was to do our part to get the students to come back and to convince them to stay; they and not the faculty were the lifeblood of the university, and thus it was the student body that needed resuscitation and life support. On the faculty webpage, under hurricane recovery resources, was the single instruction: call FEMA. We were on our own. Yet we still had jobs. Tulane's troubles with the AAUP for a series of actions, including the "separation" of tenured faculty, is well documented, and I don't need to discuss it here.<sup>24</sup> I acknowledge that I was very lucky to have been kept on the payroll from August through December 2005, and I also believe that most professors are willing to go above and beyond their job descriptions to help students in need. We usually do this from a position of security, however; we're older, wiser, and can speak from experience, as good mentors do. But not in this case. Indeed,

junior faculty were in a particularly precarious position. We had seen everyone "below" us in the hierarchy unceremoniously dispatched (as well as some "above" who were supposedly protected). Yes, we had a toe-hold on the part of the bridge that remained intact, but there was no telling when our section might fall and we left to go down with it. Rumors abounded that spring, and everything depended on student enrollment numbers for Fall 2006, which we watched like a volatile stock.

This kind of watchfulness and trepidation is not conducive to rebuilding community with colleagues. We seemed to be all in the same boat, but we were not, as I'd discovered months earlier on the field trip to the levees. What most fractured community, I think, was that everyone was on different trajectories of recovery. Because the university was closed for four months, each person returned on a schedule applicable to the circumstances of his or her experience: the condition of her house, whether he had children, what temporary living arrangements she had made elsewhere. That meant that some colleagues had been home for months and some had only returned the week before classes began in January. Long gone were the days of stoop-sitting camaraderie, of Chris Rose's "first-timer" being met and comforted by "grizzled veterans." Instead, it was as if each colleague spoke a different language, and translating between them was not possible because no one was neutral enough to be an interpreter. Everything was made more difficult by the fact that no matter where you'd been for four months, you'd been under tremendous stress. Each person's way of dealing with the trauma had hardened, solidified, and I began to see each of us as a kind of exoskeleton version of ourselves. What is it that you do to protect yourself under extreme conditions? Do you get angry? Retreat into silence? Take charge? Whatever the reaction was, it became exaggerated under the level and duration of distress we all faced. And it wasn't pretty. When I told colleagues that my husband had been offered a position outside the region and that we were contemplating leaving, one woman I considered a mentor snapped, "Like rats from a sinking ship." I swallowed and said, "We just can't keep making the 115 mile commute, not under these conditions, and we want to live together, in the same house — is that too much to ask?" She admitted that she never left Uptown, a part of the city that seemed a bit closer to normal by May: stoplights had started functioning again, limited mail service had resumed, and shops and restaurants were beginning to reopen. But she saw me as a traitor. Not as bad, maybe, as the colleagues who did not return at all after the storm, but nevertheless, a rat.

If it was difficult to reestablish community with folks who had experienced Katrina, it was differently challenging to venture back into the professional world. I felt as though I had physically changed shape (it's hard to fit that exoskeleton into regular clothes), and no longer understood a language in which I had once been fluent. I would not have gone to the Shakespeare Association of America meeting in April 2006 without the support and kindness of Lena Cowen Orlin and Naomi



Liebler, who was running the seminar I had signed up for before life exploded. Lena generously alleviated the financial impact of attending; Naomi graciously promised that all I had to do was show up, though technically she made me the respondent to the session. I would not have been able to respond had she demanded, for the seminar seemed to me to be taking place in Greek. I hoped I wasn't drooling. It was like one of those nightmares about comps where you find yourself in a room being examined on material you've never read. Only of course, no one was looking at me because they were all happily discussing the interesting ideas and papers that had brought them there. At the luncheon, I seemed to be moving in slow motion, as if my hearing was time-delayed; how could I begin to formulate a response to "what was it like?" for polite mealtime conversation? I wondered if I was ever going to be normal again, if normal was even possible.

When it came time for SAA 2007, I found performing professional life surprisingly more difficult, partly because I expected recovery to be linear. The second year should be easier than the first; it seems logical. And in some ways it was. I signed up for a seminar and was able to write my paper, using material I'd been working on before the storm. But as for the conference itself, I simply could not face it. I overslept and missed my flight, and was not able, even if I'd wanted, to reschedule in time to make my seminar. It was only at SAA 2008, over two-and-a-half years after the hurricane, that I finally felt like a scholar again — a changed one, as those who were in my seminar will recognize, but one able to function in a proper capacity.<sup>25</sup> It would not have been possible for me to get to that point without the Tuscaloosa symposium, and without teaching, each of which brought me back to life in different ways. Sharon O'Dair's creation of a space where we could both grieve and witness, where we could begin to do what it is that we do best — think about what stories mean and why they are significant — has been tremendously important. And difficult, like a combination of intense therapy and Olympic training. Over the year that I've been writing and revising this piece, I've had to begin to interpret the story, even as I've not reached the end of it; giving shape to the story is a way of creating meaning — though, I must be clear, it is also an act of exclusion, of deletion. This has been necessary, because one cannot inhabit chaos indefinitely, but something significant is lost in the translation of experience into history.

Teaching has been a lifeline in other ways. Not at first, as I've described above. The initial return to teaching was merely the broadest gesture toward reestablishment of order. But in the summer of 2006, the practice itself — as well as the subject matter — began to regain relevance. A few weeks before the hurricane struck, I had agreed to teach Shakespeare the following summer as part of the University of Southern Mississippi's study abroad program. It seemed like a dream at the time — five weeks in London, and a budget to take my students to five productions. Although

by summer I was overwhelmed by the thought of going, I went, partly because I had committed to it, and partly because I hoped it would be a space away from disaster where I could begin to heal. It was that, for two reasons: I was with people who for the most part had been through the storm, and London itself was a city dealing with the aftermath of physical and psychological trauma. I had been in the U.K. in July 2005 when the bombs exploded, but I had not been to London since, and I found it a different place. I couldn't articulate why until I was discussing with friends who live there how subdued the city seemed; I thought maybe it was me, or the heat, but they agreed the city had a wounded feel. Katrina wasn't at the forefront of my teaching, but it was important to me that it was occurring in a group and a place that recognized the long shadow of trauma.

My class was terrific — eight students, all older than twenty-one, and one older than me. We had a wonderful time exploring Shakespeare's London, something I had never done as a *teacher*, only as a scholar. It was a bit like starting again from the beginning, or rereading a loved novel from a radically new perspective; the students' enthusiasm and curiosity reignited in me something as simple as enjoyment. Except for *Titus*. It was our first production, and I had been worried that it wasn't the most appropriate choice, but *Antony and Cleopatra* was sold out and the students were clamoring to experience the Globe. So off we went. They loved the production. I found myself unable to focus, feeling heavy as if I'd been drugged, and at one point almost passed out. They didn't realize it at the time, because luckily I was next to a post and just sagged against it. Later, I tried to understand my reaction, and I realized that my mind and body literally could not take the trauma being staged in front of me. I had removed myself enough from the daily ordeal of witnessing disaster, that to be suddenly thrust back into it, even in representation, was overwhelming.

This kind of academically induced post-traumatic stress disorder was frequent through the second year of teaching after the storm. Sometimes I should have seen it coming, but other times were an absolute surprise, what I began to call "black hole" moments, where the bottom unexpectedly dropped out and there was no hiding it. I returned from London to my new position a long way from the disaster zone and faced a new form of culture shock. We had almost decided not to come; we had been to visit — and at one point I'd turned to my husband and said, "I don't know if I can live around people who haven't been traumatized." From the outside, it would seem not a wise career move for me to leave a tenure-track position to move almost halfway across the country to live among the untraumatized. But we kept coming back to the statement I'd made on our visit, and we realized we did not want our child to grow up in a world where daily trauma is the norm. And thus we return to what cannot be said; we are both traitors and survivors, depending on the angle of perspective. Unless, of course, you're not from the Gulf region, in which case the angle is easy: you're a victim. The first time the parent of a new school chum of our daughter's introduced

us to other parents as "victims of Katrina," we were stunned. To us, the victims of Katrina died. Terminology is tough: we think of ourselves as something closer to veterans.

In my first semester teaching in Colorado, I chose to do a class on plague. I've taught it before, it springs from my research interests, it seemed a safe choice. It even gave me a chance to bring up my Katrina experiences at times — not too much — but I do think those of us who've moved into the wider world need to make that experience known to others. I had not really thought through, however, what it would be like to reread Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year* or Camus's *Plague*. Because it came earlier in the semester, Defoe's work hit me hardest; I had to walk into class one day and admit that the text was too difficult an experience for me to read. We talked about my struggle with the text versus theirs, which had much more to do with lack of narrative structure and expectations about novels. A teachable moment, but not one I'm particularly proud of, though at least I didn't cry. More grueling were the moments I was not prepared for at all; in the following spring, for example, my Shakespeare class was having a lively discussion of the final scene in *The Winter's Tale*. One young man ventured the comment that it was like those performers, you know, down on Pearl Street who don't move until you give them money. And — without thinking — "I said, I haven't been there, but I know what you mean; we've seen some of those moving statues in the French Quarter." That was absolutely the first time I had the experience of a normal off-hand memory, and had in any way mentioned New Orleans. Because the students knew I'd lived there, and I'd never talked about it, they pounced: "Did your house flood?" "Did you lose everything?" "What was it like?" I was speechless; I'd dropped from my first clear moment of normalcy right down to the depths of alienation. No, my house did not flood (does that mean I'm okay?). No, we did not lose everything (only our city, our life as we knew it, a future that did not happen). What was it like? I really have trouble with this question. It was bad — is that enough? Now, when students ask this, I say: if all services stopped right now, how long could you make it with the food in your house, the money in your pocket, and the gas in your car? They usually argue that nothing that catastrophic could happen here. I tell them, you are three days away from anarchy, but they don't believe me.

### "Leave not a rack behind": Remembering and Recording

How does one find a truth in fragments and debris? Sometimes you find it in talismans — special Mardi Gras beads, the ones few outsiders would recognize as such, that I wear to mark occasions silently, or the little holiday ornament that I found in the mud while on the field trip to the levees, which I keep on my desk. Sometimes you construct it out of ephemera, like the small wooden box made of scraps of wood salvaged after the storm that I bought at the Bywater

art market. Or like the play Hattiesburg High put on in the spring of 2006, *The Katrina Project: Hell and High Water*, a kind of docudrama pieced together from interviews of evacuees and others conducted by students in the weeks after the storm, along with news coverage, and so on.<sup>26</sup> Sometimes you take what has been displaced and transform it into something new. As we were leaving Hattiesburg, one of my husband's former students gave him a necklace for me and our daughter; she called it "Faith," and it came with a card reading: "This necklace contains 7 fresh water pearls @ center that survived the 23-ft storm surge of hurricane Katrina. They were still sitting — in a single strand — on my mother's dresser when we returned to dig among the debris for our belongings. 7 pearls for the best of luck to you; "Faith" 'cause you just gotta have it sometimes. My parents lived in Delisle, Mississippi on 8-29-05."

Why did she give us, strangers, such precious remnants salvaged from her life? I think she wanted us to bear the memory: we knew this place, at this time, under these conditions. We understand the meaning of those pearls when we wear them; we can't forget, even as we move beyond. She also, it seems to me, wanted to bear witness to those connections we have with people we barely know; she acknowledged the powerful significance a teacher can have in a student's life, not by giving him a gift, but by offering it to all of us. I am connected to her because my spouse made a difference in her life. From William's perspective, however, the pearls represent something else. Faith — you just gotta have it sometimes, because sometimes those who've made a difference leave you behind, like rats from a sinking ship.

The brutal truth of the aftermath is that you don't always have faith. It gets pushed to the limit and sometimes fails. That's where I was just before the second anniversary as I was writing the original version of this essay, and came across the *Times-Picayune* article on Katrina's unidentified dead. Since one of my principal research interests is in the early modern bills of mortality, and particularly the poor parish women who searched the dead to gather the information recorded in those bills, I had, in the year after the storm, followed the issue of vital statistics with a quasi-professional eye.<sup>27</sup> I remember reading in the paper before I left New Orleans that the coroner was sending off DNA samples so that those remaining bodies could be identified. Thus, my shock and horror as I read a year later that in fact dozens of bodies still lacked names. Because I am investigating marginal women in nearly 400-year-old documents, I have subscribed to the notion that *time* has made these searchers of the dead invisible. Yet I am faced with erasures having nothing to do with time, and everything to do with lack of resources, the chaos of trauma, and the simple fact that we can and do — all of us — turn away. I chose to go north to my family in Mississippi rather than find a way to get down to Houma (where the coroner was based after the storm) to see

if I could help. Someone else would help the officials to identify and care for those lost John/Jane Does. But that's not what happened, and thus I found myself so complicit in creating the silences of history that it called into question my whole professional identity. The rack dislimns; to inhabit the storm is to exist in a space where any attempt to read the clouds, the tableaux, is an encounter with absolute illegibility. For those of us trained to be professional readers and skilled interpreters, absolute illegibility threatens deeply one's sense of self. Here I am Antony, yet cannot hold this visible shape.

### Postscript

Here's the thing about "aftermath": for much of its life as a word, it did not connote quite what it does to us. Etymologically it derives from "after-mowth" and refers to the second growth after the first mowing (*OED*). This association seems to me to reflect the relationship between the experience of trauma and the history we make of it; the narrative of what destruction has meant must spring up from what's been left behind, but that second growth can never match the depth of what engendered it. The meaning of the storm is thus dislimned from narrative — both severed from it, and delineated by it. By outlining trauma we give it visible shape, but we must also acknowledge that the narrative is marked as much by what is excluded as by that which remains. Recovery is circular, even cyclical. Thus, I find myself making the final revisions to this essay on the third anniversary of Katrina, as New Orleans prepares for another storm, and as the unclaimed and unidentified dead are finally laid to rest.<sup>28</sup>

### Notes

1. See <http://www.katrinanationalmemorialpark.com/>. As of this writing, two memorials are complete: the Katrina Memorial Biloxi, dedicated on 15 February 2006 without victims' names, although the original plan claimed that "once the list of victims is officially complete, their names will be engraved on the memorial" (*GCIS On-Line Information Guide* 2006); and the monument in St. Bernard Parish at the Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet at Shell Beach, dedicated on 29 August 2006, listing the names of the dead from that parish. As of 30 August 2007, however, 157 names needed to be added to the St. Bernard Memorial (see Maggi 2007). Recent reports suggest that a few names also should be removed from the monument; see Rioux 2008.
2. Indeed, the primary function of the memorial will be to provide a final resting place for the unknown and unclaimed bodies, one more fitting than the "miserable, miserable" current potter's field, according to Coroner Frank Minyard (quoted in Doug MacCash's review of the memorial in the *Times-Picayune* (2007)).

3. No single governmental agency seems to be charged with the responsibility of gathering the names of Katrina's victims across state or even county/parish lines, nor is there an authority charged with officially combining the mortality statistics. As of this writing, the Centers for Disease Control provides statistics on the death toll in Alabama and Florida in its "Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report" (Centers for Disease Control 2006); the Mississippi Department of Health has that state's statistics (Mississippi Department of Health 2005), see especially Appendix E; and the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals have their "Deceased Victims Reports" (see Brunkard, Namulanda, and Ratard 2008.). To my knowledge, the only group attempting to gather together all of this information, and more, is the Earth Institute at Columbia University, which I discuss below.
4. See Maggi 2007. Authorities in Mississippi, by contrast, are counting only those deaths that occurred on 29 August and are directly storm-related, although this has not made establishing an official list any easier; see Norman 2006. At first glance, the disparity in definition mirrors the divergence in the storm's impact on the two regions: the submerging of New Orleans for several weeks versus the surge that ravaged coastal Mississippi in a matter of hours.
5. The Earth Institute at Columbia University is attempting to collect statistics about anybody considered to be a Katrina victim regardless of chronology or location; see Earth Institute at Columbia University (2011). It remains to be seen how successful this effort will be; this list is not primarily meant to memorialize the dead, but to "better understand how natural disasters . . . affect all levels of society."
6. See, for example, Caruth 1996.
7. Earth Institute at Columbia University [cited 2011].
8. At first glance, the nature of the events of September 11 — occurring on one day, localized in specific places, names recorded on flight manifests — suggests why it was possible to determine an official list within one year, despite such a large number of fatalities, over twice as many as officially resulted from Katrina. These individuals' names will all be engraved on the memorial being built at the World Trade Center site (<http://www.national911memorial.org>). Where the victims of 9/11 have more in common with Katrina victims is in the aftermath: those, particularly emergency workers, who have died from exposure to deadly toxins after the collapse of the Towers; see the series of editorials, "9/11: The Forgotten Victims," in the *New York Daily News* (2007).
9. To give a random example of the particular nightmares created by bureaucracies staffed and navigated by the traumatized: it took me seven months to get a single piece of paper signed that verified my date of termination from Tulane University.

10. In addition to all the participants in the Tuscaloosa symposium, I would like to thank Teresa Toulouse, Michael Zimmerman, Amy Gutierrez, Trent Desselle, Lisa Boyle, David Glimp, Nan Goodman, Katherine Eggert, Mark Winokur, Paula Morris, Tom Moody, Martina Sciolino, Katy Archer, Susan Dunn, Shelby Richardson, and of course, William Kuskin, for being willing to, and needing to, engage in Katrina talk even now.
11. References to *Antony and Cleopatra* are to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, first edition (Shakespeare 1974).
12. Unlike Antony, however, I am not a "Roman" by birth. How I have come to love the South is another story. And while the parallels between New Orleans and Cleopatra's Egypt may seem easily apparent, the analogy between Mississippi and Augustus' Rome perhaps strikes you as extreme; I would suggest that to have lived in Mississippi during the height of George W. Bush's presidency is, in crucial ways, to have resided in the heart of the empire.
13. An official forecast that included potential landfall on the coast of Mississippi was apparently issued at 3 pm local time on August 26, just hours before the closing on our house. See Richard D. Knabb, Jamie R. Rhome, and Daniel P. Brown, "Tropical Cyclone Report, Hurricane Katrina, 23-30 August 2005" (2005, 14). This information seems to be contradicted by material presented in their "Table 5. Coastal watch and warning summary" (36), which shows the first hurricane watch issued for Morgan City, LA to Pearl River, MS at 9 am on the 27th. That watch was modified to run from Intracoastal City, LA to the AL/FL border at 3 pm on the 27th, less than 36 hours before landfall.
14. We splurged on a small battery-operated radio-TV, although we had one sitting in a cupboard in our house in New Orleans; it seemed ridiculous at the time, since we'd probably be back in the city on Tuesday, but I confess to being an anxious weather-watcher. For those interested in inland Mississippi's experience of the storm, see some selections from WDAM-TV's coverage on their self-issued DVD, *Hurricane Katrina: Through Our Eyes*.
15. Officially, Katrina was a Category 2 storm (winds 96-110 mph) as it crossed Hattiesburg. Local reporting, however, put peak wind speed gusts at 130 mph (equal to a strong Category 3 storm); see Clark Love, "Hurricane Katrina Wind Speed Map" (2007).
16. For those of you who have less information about what happened on Mississippi's coast, I recommend Bay St. Louis resident Ellis Anderson's beautifully written series, "The Language of Loss" at <http://katrinapatina.blogspot.com/> (subsequently published in book form as *Under Surge, Under Siege: The Odyssey of Bay St. Louis and Katrina* in 2010; Anderson 2005). See also *Katrina: Mississippi Women Remember*, ed. Sally Pfister (2007).

17. Just to be clear, a wide range of activities that week were all classified as looting; I would have been glad to know someone had availed themselves of our stored water, food, batteries, and candles. What happened to many Oak Street businesses was more violent and malicious; see Douglas Brinkley, *The Great Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, and the Mississippi Gulf Coast* (2006), especially 499-507. For another view of the varieties of looting, see Jed Horne, *Breach of Faith: Hurricane Katrina and the Near Death of a Great American City* (2006), especially 168-175. Here is one example of what does make New Orleans a great city: it was widely reported in the immediate aftermath that officers in the NOPD had "commandeered" Cadillacs from a local dealership (see Brinkley, *Great Deluge* (2006), 205); what you probably don't know is that one of the first billboard advertisements to go up after the storm was a lushly elegant one for Sewell Cadillac with the text: "Driven by New Orleans' finest." My first sight of that sign was probably the first time I laughed out loud after the storm.
18. Tulane did immediately fire all teaching assistants, adjuncts, and non-tenure track faculty, making a difficult situation infinitely worse.
19. University of Southern Mississippi has two campuses with combined departments, so as Chair, William journeyed with colleagues down to the Gulf Park campus to survey damage. Situated right along the beach on Route 90, what had been a beautiful campus was devastated. In the Humanities building, the ground floor had been swept bare, with the surge even pulling the elevators out of their shafts; yet upstairs offices were left untouched, undisturbed.
20. William chronicled his experience in a graphic novella he produced with a friend; see Kuskin and Adcock 2006.
21. Professor Nelson still conducts these field trips; see <http://www.tulane.edu/~sanelson/Katrina/index.html>.
22. These columns have since been collected into a book; see Chris Rose, *I Dead in Attic: After Katrina* (2007). The significance of Rose's columns was tremendous, especially in the first two years, but at times even now, for building a sense of community, cathartic release of emotion, and generally recording the absurdities. My experience of the immediacy of this kind of communal reading has given me a new appreciation of Thomas Dekker's plague pamphlets, and at some point I hope to explore that connection in more detail.
23. That my experience is not unique is suggested by what happened at the annual event that provides an opportunity for female faculty from across the university to get together and mingle; usually held in the fall, our luncheon was delayed until January 2006. Part of the ritual of this event is to go around the room, each person saying a few sentences about her research interests; I was so impressed that everyone dutifully articulated her current work. I wondered jealously



if I for the last five months had migrated to say, the Folger Library, whether I would feel more coherent, more competent. So, when it came to my turn, I said, "I was going to say that I can't remember what I work on, but y'all have been so articulate, I have to try." And I said another sentence giving the broadest gesture, and sat down. Quite a number of women came up to my afterward to thank me and say that they were feeling the same way. And I knew then that the Folger wouldn't have made any difference.

24. In early December 2005, "at least 160 members of the faculty . . . received notifications of release," most but not all in the medical school; see *Report of an AAUP Special Committee: Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans Universities* (2007), Section VI. "Tulane University," 101.
25. My deep thanks to Rebecca Totaro and Margaret Healy, as well as all the other participants in our plague seminar for their support and enthusiasm.
26. For an account of this production, see Ted Roggenbuck's review essay in *The Southern Quarterly* (2006).
27. See "Searchers of the Dead: Authority, Marginality, and the Interpretation of Plague in England, 1574-1665" (1999).
28. See Maggi 2008.

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