Introduction: High Tides and New Formations

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Designed by our frequent cover artist John Jennings, the cover of this issue of The Black Scholar commemorates the tragedy that was Hurricane Katrina as well as the ongoing struggles of a city still reckoning with manmade and state-sanctioned disasters. In the wake of “the storm,” as many of the black natives prefer to refer to it—that particular event bearing meanings and losses too great perhaps to diminish with a name—those struggles and disasters are clearly diasporic, as refugees now face a new generation both within and without a city that has become as unrecognizable as it is economically uninhabitable.

After all, Katrina signified the “high tide of a new racial formation.”¹ So it was described by noted scholar/activist Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua in the pages of this very journal when it first commemorated the squall of racism, inequality, violence, and opportunism both revealed and instigated by Katrina. And given New Orleans’ more than significant role in the history and culture of this country, the storm was an event of “such magnitude that it has forced African Americans to reassess their relationship to the United States.”²

Of course, such reassessments and political realignments are endemic to any articulation of “blackness” in America. But since the climate of race so clearly darkened in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, almost as if it was an augur of greater betrayals, commemorating “the storm” forces indeed a return to not just where we were when the levees broke, but more urgently to where we thought we were and who we have become since then. After all, that “new racial formation” is well upon us, one of gentrification as recovery, displacement as criminality, and state-sanctioned racist violence as raceless urban cleansing—is it even possible that we may look back one day with nostalgia to the far-from-idyllic days before the storm?

If our cover is a bold statement of commemoration, the two essays on New Orleans in this issue are statements of reclaimation and analysis; not only of the city but of what now seems clearly to have been not just the end of a particular black past but a suspiciously designed future without blacks.

To participate in that retelling and reclaiming is Lynnell L. Thomas, author of Desire and Disaster in New Orleans: Tourism, Race, and Historical Memory (Duke University Press, 2014). She uses her “native” view to filter a detailed, critical examination of just how New Orleans, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, “has become a laboratory for market-driven government and neo-liberal restructuring.” The “neo-New Orleans” she maps for us is driven by tourism as a façade for complex and sinister goings-on visible to someone gifted/cursed with a particular form of double consciousness: both a native and a scholar of New Orleans, whose professional commitments place her firmly in the city’s diaspora. Nikki Brown’s essay opens up the post-Katrina city as the fount of a new explosion of black activism and community radicalism that antecedes, and in some ways influenced, the kind of political work seen on the ground in places like Ferguson, Missouri, and

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New York in the wake of the police murders of unarmed black men. Though focused on Dallas, Texas, Jodi Skipper’s essay on the black church, St. Paul United Methodist, is also a story of the complex socioeconomic violence of urban renewal—in this case, the movement from a freedman’s community into an Arts District—as well as the equally complex politics of black resistance by way of what she calls cultural heritage politics: “the strategic manufacturing of community identities as a form of political mobilization.” As with Nikki Brown’s essay, Horace R. Hall focuses on the mentoring of African American adolescent males by returning us to the canonical radical work of Paolo Freire. Rather than present simple updates of Freire or just a rote application, Hall details the work of specific mentoring groups and organizations, presents and analyzes testimony while arguing for the value of cultural context in any attempt to “empower” those most suspicious of our desire to empower them.

These essays are all in their ways focused on the uses of the black past in the context of civic or national renewal. Our closing feature is, however, conceptually and historically linked to New Orleans in that it is arguably America’s most Caribbean city. It is an interview with internationally renowned Afro-Dominican singer-songwriter, feminist, and activist Xiomara Fortuna. Fully acknowledged as one of the most important and influential musicians on and from the Dominican Republic, this interview focuses primarily on cultural politics, on her work and experience as a black Latina in a country riven with racial and sexual complexities so often misread and misheard by locals, Americans, and the international community.

I’d like to close with the words of prominent African-American poet and non-fiction writer Brenda Marie Osbey who was the first peer-selected poet laureate of New Orleans: “New Orleans has become a touchstone, a measure by which humanity, human decency, right action and simple doggedness in the face of abandonment and near defeat are judged.” As such, it is a storm that endures.

Notes

1. Cha-Jua, Sundiata Keita. “Introduction to The Black Scholar Special Issue on Hurricane Katrina: High Tide of a New Racial Formation,” The Black Scholar 36, no. 4. (Winter 2006).
2. Ibid., 4.
3. Brenda Marie Osbey. “New Orleans Past Definite.” Unpublished manuscript, 9.