CITY WITHOUT PEOPLE: THE KATRINA POEMS, by Niyi Osundare. Boston: Black Widow Press, 2011. 106 pages, paper, $19.95, ISBN: 098370791X; ISBN-13: 978-0983707912. Reviewed by Shannon Hanks-Mackey

"Nyi, we are going to drown." 

Written over a span of five years, this latest book of poetry by Niyi Osundare, a Nigerian-born poet, dramatist, critic and scholar who is currently a Distinguished Professor of English at the University of New Orleans, commands a nuanced understanding of what it means to survive catastrophe in myriad ways. Divided into five parts, from the onset of the storm through to the continued institutional failures and personal experiences of trauma that coalesce with hope and gratitude, it is a grievous account of his experience of the 2005 hurricane that brought ecological and economic devastation to parts of the Gulf Coast and killed nearly 2,000 people.

Opening with the coming of wind and water that “began as a whisper among / The leaves” (13), one of the strongest components of this collection is the author’s reckoning of both the creative and destructive aspects of these natural elements, particularly water. In the interview with Osundare that concludes the book, he mentions how the waters reached his home yet avoided the University of New Orleans, which lies closer to the lake. It is here that he “kept on wondering about water’s logic” (127).

In “Katrina Anthem,” his contempt is palpable:

Ka Ka Katrina, shameless witch
Who quenched our lights and swamped the switch
Atop your stick and stormy broom
You spread your rot from room to room
[...]
Blood on your hand, skulls in your fridge
You swamp the river and swallow the bridge
In your crowded kitchen a foul fleshfeast
Fit for the monster and hellish beast
[...]
Tossed on your flood a gentle toy
That yesterday was some baby’s joy
To the lonesome widow what a pain you bring
In your murky water her wedding ring (14)

While it reads like the “rhyming horror” of a playground song, its lack of ambiguity and its placement in the beginning of the collection demarcates the emotional immediacy of a fresh, incomprehensible experience and all its “rawness,” from that of the more circumpect poems that appear later in the book.

Further fleshing out the events during the storm, he vividly portrays the physical dismantling of his home and the city itself. In “Omiyale” (17) he narrates this domestic corruption by a lake “uninvited,” the water working like marauding thieves:

Like a band of waiting monsters
It barged through the door without knocking
Tore through the windows like a desperate burglar
Swelled up the carpet, billowed up the walls
Daubed my paintings in its own satanic colours
Sat briefly on my sofa, its dirty legs
On the coffee table, capsized my happy mugs
Tossed up the tv like a Disney toy
Then lunged towards my crowded kitchen (16)

The ecological causes, and historical implications, of Katrina’s damage are not lost on Osundare. Nor does he avoid addressing the opportunistic businesses that arrive to profit from salvaging, or calling out visiting spectators in “Disastourism.” In “Water Never Forgets,” he speaks to the destroyed wetlands and the consequences of our ecological carelessness:

So, when we steal its swamps
un-fin its fishes
and trample its shells
When we scoop its heart
steel its span
and cement its stomach
It never fails
to roar back and reclaim
its trespassed honour (19)

In “Katrina Snapshots,” he reminds us of the shuffling blame game that occurred afterwards and reveals the thoughts of those who felt as if “The day the levees broke / The floods paved my way / Back to the plantation” (70). With “Path of Thunder” he purposefully conflates the creation and path of Atlantic hurricanes with that of African slaves brought over to the Americas:
Throughout the book, the concept of loss—of things, people, and, especially, books and the author’s own written works—is explored. Yet, the third section, titled “The Language of Pain,” holds the collection’s most thoughtful explorations of loss. In “Mares of Night,” he reveals his own lasting struggle with trauma:

Always, they come at night
When darkness walks the streets
And houses wear their eaves
Like leaden shrouds
In the thin space
Between my restless eyes
Of skeletal sighs
 [...] 
In the water fray
Sentences stagger in the brew
Loose-jointed, severely skewed...
They come, always at night
 [...] 
The mares gallop at night
Laden with bloated losses. (60)

The fourth section, “Katrina Will Not Have The Last Word,” is dedicated to those who came to the family’s aid immediately afterwards. Worldwide, no one is forgotten in his sensitivity to honoring gratitude amidst adversity. The first to arrive is their neighbor, Placido, who rescues Osundare and his wife from their attic where they were trapped for two days. Giving them advice and aid beforehand, some of which they did not think they’d need, Osundare calls his confidant, storm-prepared neighbor, “Cuba-born, world-wise,” someone who understands the “language of angry winds” (91):

Weatherer of many seasons
He cracks thunder’s code
Knowing full well when the water we drink
Swells rapidly into the flood which consumes us
Those who live by the sea, he said, must
Learn vital lessons from the ambiguity of water (92)

By the end of the section, in “What Mother Said” (95), Osundare embraces this “ambiguity of water,” these complexities of its character, its insinuation into human life, for better or worse, and has paid homage to the god whose namesake he is. He writes about a dream in which his mother’s voice comes to comfort and guide him. In this sixteen-page poem, she talks of her difficulty in conceiving and thanks Placido, the “godly neighbor” who saved her son. She calls Osundare, “Osun’s precious gift.” Part of the Yoruban pantheon, Osun is associated with fertility and life-giving waters:

Her tall, abiding grace
Osun gave you to me
Yes, Osun gave you to me
She of the soothing voice
And liquid laughter
Eyes like fresh-laid eggs
Lips like well-sculpted lobes
She whose beauty is bounty
Skin ebony-black, teeth cotton-white
Wardrobe generous like her supple motions
She of the patient passion, the billowing gaze
Who conquers raging fires with liquid mercies [...] 

His mother also condemns the “fetid waters of another land” for removing her son from the waters that kept him safe and tells of his consistency and loyalty to his homeland in the midst of his wanderings:

Eyekaire never went back on her promise
You waded strong and wise in her waters
 [...] 
You flowed back and forth
Like her famous water
Every healthy coast your consort
The valley your lofty roost
You sang the rainsong everywhere you went
You never broke your covenant with water (99)

Yet reminds him of the continued presence of safety after devastation:

Osun ripples one
In the valley beneath their shadows
Her vigilant water astir in your veins
 [...] 
Your limbs are tributaries of a generous river
No alien floods will stem your flow (101)

In “Enia Lasoo Mi,” a Yoruban saying which means “people are my clothes,” he writes about the “pageant of clothes”—sent to him and his wife after losing all their possessions—that “Flew fast across the ocean / Sewn with care, embroidered with kindness” (77). In “What Mother Said,” the proverb appears again. Referring to the potential for closeness, protection, warmth and support amongst humanity, the book’s brutal beginnings end with a proverb of hope. Stylistically different from his earlier work, the unambiguous poems of this book mirror “Katrina’s devastations” which “are the type that cut straight to the bone.”
transcending “trivial versification” (9). So, if aesthetic complexity is sacrificed for a sincere uncovering of one’s innermost struggles with grief, anger, betrayal and hope, Osundare has more than proved the value and importance of doing so.

“It’s not just the French Quarter that is New Orleans. No. Not just the tourist area. New Orleans is people.”

Endnotes

1. Osundare’s wife upon seeing the then eight-feet high waters.
2. A Yoruba name for “home-devastating floods,” City Without People, p. 17.

I MUST RESIST: BAYARD RUSTIN’S LIFE IN LETTERS, Michael G. Long, ed. (San Francisco: City Light Books, 2012) 516 pages, paper, $19.95, ISBN: 9780872865785. Reviewed by E. Patrick Johnson

In the last decade or so there has been a groundswell of works on the late civil rights activist, Bayard Rustin. No less than six biographies—James Haskin’s Bayard Rustin: Behind the Scenes of the Civil Rights Movement (1997); Jervis Anderson’s Bayard Rustin Troubles I’ve Seen (1998); Daniel Levine’s Bayard Rustin and the Civil Rights Movement (1999); John D’Emilio’s Last Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin (2003); Larry Brimmer’s We Are One: The Story of Bayard Rustin (2007); and Jerald Podair’s Bayard Rustin: American Dreamer (2008)—a collection of Rustin’s writings—Devon Carbado and Tim Weiss, Time on Two Crosses: The Writings of Bayard Rustin (2003); a play—Brian Freeman’s Civil Sex (2004); and a documentary film—Nancy Kate and Bennett Singer’s, Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin (2010). Despite this bounty of scholarship and creative work on this civil rights icon, there is still a large swath of the population who has never heard of him. At some point, however, I imagine he will be “rediscovered” and become a canonical figure in the history of the fight for equality of African Americans.

In I Must Resist: Bayard Rustin’s Letters historian Michael G. Long has collected and edited an enormous body of Rustin’s letters across forty-five years that gives the reader insight into Rustin’s life that even his biographers have not been able to capture. This is namely the case because the epistolary form as opposed to the biographical gives the reader more of a sense of Rustin’s “voice” as well as the contradictions and complexities of who he was as a political figure. These letters provide insight into Rustin as a brilliant strategist and organizer—not just of the 1963 March on Washington, for which most people know him, but also his involvement in other major civil and human rights protests, marches, boycotts, and civil disobedience events in the United States and around the world. These include his involvement in the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott, his leadership at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference on Transportation and Nonviolent Integration—two events that framed the beginning of the Civil Rights movement and solidified him as the “right-hand man” of Martin Luther King, Jr. Indeed, these letters bear out that it was Rustin who was the ghostwriter on many of King’s letters, memos, and speeches. The letters also reflect over and over how committed Rustin was to spirituality and pacifism (based on his Quaker upbringing) and his desire to infuse the movement with that same sensibility.

The book’s twenty chapters and close to 300 letters are ordered thematically and chronologically; there is also an introduction. Long also includes letters and FBI correspondences written to and about Rustin, which provide further context and historical evidence of the kind of person he was and the kind of person people perceived him to be. Long provides a brief introduction to each letter that explains its content, or, in some cases, he provides lengthier introductions that are more like short history lessons that bolster the historical context. The chapter topics range from Rustin’s early anti-war stance and letters from prison in the early 1940s, to letters to King and others in the 1950s and letters (of which there are few) about gay rights in the 1980s.

A few chapters contain letters that are worth noting. Chapter One, “War Is Wrong,” includes a letter that Rustin wrote to the New York Monthly Meeting, a Quaker organization in Manhattan. In that letter he admonishes the group not to “assist the government in making men into efficient soldiers” (2). It is also where Rustin repeats, in redacted and revised form, a slogan that he credits to Patrick Malin, a professor at Swarthmore at the time: “Speak the truth to power.” Chapter Two, “One Ought to Resist the Entire System,” contains remarkable letters Rustin wrote while incarcerated at the Ashland Federal Correctional Institution in Kentucky in 1944. One letter in particular to the warden, R. P. Hagerman, demonstrates Rustin’s embodiment of “speaking truth to power,” for he lays out eleven points for the warden to consider regarding racial segregation in the federal correctional institution—a very risky thing to do in 1940s Kentucky, or anywhere for that matter. Chapter Eight, “Let Us Resist With Our Whole Beings,” contains a letter to a Carl Geider about his thoughts on interracial marriage, fifteen years before the 1967 Loving vs. Virginia Supreme Court case. What is striking about Rustin’s thoughts is how they could easily be used as an argument to support the current fight to
recognize gay marriage. Rustin writes: “Marriage is an individual matter. I have no right to advocate that one marry anyone else, and I have no right to forbid by my action anyone’s marrying a person of his choice. And thus I am unalterably opposed to laws in many states . . . forbidding interracial marriage” (147).

One astonishing thing about Rustin’s collection of letters is the fact that he wrote to every American president in his adult life—from Truman, Eisenhower, Nixon, Kennedy and Johnson in his younger life to Ford, Carter, and Reagan while an older man. The themes of these letters range from anti-war and civil rights to pleading the case for the poor. In on particular letter to John F. Kennedy in 1962, Rustin asks the president to intervene on behalf of an elderly “conscientious objector” who had stopped paying taxes after the bombing of Pearl Harbor and whose social security payments were stopped as a result. In the closing paragraph of the letter, Rustin writes:

I am extremely sorry to have had to burden you with this problem, but I am certain that you would want to know of the hardship that the government’s decision has made for a very elderly man who is not in good health and who has few years yet to live. (252)

Also remarkable is that there are no letters that mention Kennedy’s assassination in November 1963.

Those who do know the story of Bayard Rustin are usually aware of the scandals that dogged his life around two issues: being homosexual and being affiliated with the Communist Party, the latter of which Rustin often denied. The letters Rustin penned and those penned about him all restage this controversy in startling detail and demonstrate the ways in which he tried to negotiate his sexual identity and political affiliations with his commitment to the struggle for civil and equal rights and his relationships with his political peers, particularly Martin Luther King, Jr. What is interesting about both of these issues is that, while the drama around Bayard’s sexuality, including his multiple arrests for “perversion,” and the tension with King around these issues is front and center, there are no letters to lovers included in the volume. This strikes me as odd given Brian Freeman’s play, Civil Sex, which is based in part, on interviews with Rustin’s former lovers. More interesting still, is the absence of letters between Rustin and James Baldwin, who was a known friend and who about whom there were rumors that Rustin saved him from more than one “rough trade” sexual encounter. Indeed, both men had “complicated” relationships with their sexuality and racial identity. This latter point is revealed in a letter to black gay writer, Joseph Beam, who had invited Rustin to be a part of the now canonical anthology, In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology. In declining the invitation, Rustin tells Beam, “I fundamentally consider sexual orientation to be a private matter. As such, it has not been a factor which has greatly influenced my role as an activist” (461). But as Long points out, just eight days later, Rustin sent a letter to the mayor of New York, Ed Koch, imploring him not to allow amendments to a recently passed Gay Rights Bill.

Despite the absence of letters that would have provided a glimpse into the more intimate aspects of his life (perhaps such letters do not exist, given Rustin’s thoughts about keeping his sexuality a private matter) I Must Resist is an important contribution to Rustin scholarship. Long does an exemplary job of culling a dizzying array of correspondences between Rustin and various correspondents that provide a three-dimensional portrait of a figure who, despite being an integral part of the history of African Americans’ struggle for equality, still gets left in the shadows.

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Meta DeEwa Jones’s recent tour de force of contemporary criticism, The Muse is Music, most certainly must take its place among classic and recent critical studies of African-American poetry and, as Jones describes her topic, “jazz resonant” writing such as Houston Baker’s Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature, Farah Jasmine Griffin’s “Who Set You Flowin?”; The African-American Migration Narrative, Aldon Nielsen’s Black Chant, Daphne Brooks’ Bodies in Dissent, Sascha Feinstein’s Jazz Poetry, Kimberly Benston’s Performing Blackness, Craig Werner’s Playing the Changes, Tony Bolden’s Afro-Blue, and Rob Wallace’s Improvisation and the Making of American Literary Modernism. As a knowledgeable reader knows and a curious one will discover, my brief list here already makes up a diverse (if partial) group of approaches. And Jones’s study itself reads as a veritable anthology (read bouquet) of vantages on the scripts and sounds, blemished bodies and burnished beauties that comprise the galaxy of jazz resonant writing and performance about which orbits (to my eye at least) the most resonant conceptions of American modernity we have.

Part of the power of Jones’s bouquet testifies directly to a dethroned (at least de-centered) set of critical blindnesses: that African American aesthetics and modernism don’t overlap; that our critical corpus can continue to treat poetry as second-class, or as Jones puts it, “loose change among the more highly valued paper currency of fiction and non-fiction prose”; that jazz, in any form, can be sufficiently discussed within hetero-normative categories, foremost among these, male instrumentalist/female vocalist; and, that critical appraisal of the oral and aural, the visual and invisible/non-visual, the embodied and the archival, the page-proofed and performed facets of our poetic worlds (past and present) can function in dissociation from each other. Jones spins circles around these concentric myopias and disassembles their authority, freeing the energies trapped in the critical categories into some semblance of correspondence to the ways that they operated (and operate) on the stages and pages of the work itself.

Possibly the most important dichotomy unstitched by the energy (I don’t like the word agency) of Jones’s work in The Muse is Music is the one between scholar/theorist and artist/performer. In the days before a professional (meaning academic) black critical practice in the US, and, it must be said, in the days of widespread white racism in the scholarly mainstream, it was readily acknowledged (by those who cared) that black writers were themselves the foremost scholars of black writing and performance: Langston Hughes’s “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” Zora Neale Hurston’s “The Characteristics of Negro Expression,” Richard Wright’s “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” and James Baldwin’s “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” of course, are readily acknowledged classical contributions to modern African American cultural performance and literary art. In The Muse is Music, Jones also notes the importance of critical and scholarly writings and speakings of contemporary working poets such as Amiri Baraka, Nathaniel Mackey, Quincy Troupe, Yusef Komunyakaa and Harryette Mullen. Even more crucially, she attends to how poems and performance exert their own critical/theoretical energy. Jones powerfully evinces the possibilities for an attentive critic who can access the singularly valuable points of view through which poets and poems view each other, themselves, and even stare back at the critics as well.

In one important branch of innovative forays, Jones notes the importance of poetry and poetics as experiences not reducible to readings. Her experience with archival materials in print, audio and visual media at such places as the Library of Congress, the Institute for Jazz Studies at Rutgers University, San Francisco State University Poetry Center and Yale University led her to re-think the structure of the “archive” as well as focusing on the contents of the collections. Jones’s critical attention explores the texture and timbre of poetic voices (both audio recorded and witnessed live or on video) as well as the physical rhythms in the bodies of poets, even audiences, as part and parcel of the subject of study in a contemporary reckoning with the African American jazz resonant poetic corpus. The Muse is Music explores a multidimensional (height-width-depth, as well as sight, sound, touch) galaxy of signifying—which she usually approaches as queering—responses, echoes, and reverberations between poets, musicians and filmmakers such as Paul Laurence Dunbar and Gwendolyn Brooks, Michael Harper and Sterling Brown, Harryette Mullen and Billie Holiday, Thomas Sayers Ellis and the P-Funk continuum, Nate Mackey and John Coltrane, Elizabeth Alexander and Melvin Dixon, Issac Julien and Langston Hughes or James Baldwin to name only a few. To her impressive (understatement) catalogue of poetic phenomena in print, sound, and in the flesh itself, Jones adds needed attention to the important role of publications such as Furious Flowering, Cave Canem, and Callaloo to the vascular structure of contemporary African American and jazz resonant writing and performance.

As a result, for its variety of approach and the multidimensional account of the work it holds in its (and our) attention, The Muse is Music makes a unique contribution to the multiple fields with which it interacts. If the study has a substantive limitation, it may be the
extent to which it replicates the weaknesses of its genre (critical/theoretical literary studies) that can at times obscure poetic complexity under the Gatling gun-like polysyllabics symptomatic of contemporary academic language. At times, Jones has difficulty translating the lyrical economy and angular brilliance of (what really is the) signifyin(g) tradition into the professional idiom of the contemporary critical study.

**IN SPRLVG AND Au,** William Carlos Williams notes that prose language acts as a clear window through which readers encounter the objects and subjects in the writing. Poetry, for Williams, is writing where the language itself becomes a subject or object in its own right, at times frustrating (as he does almost everywhere in *Spring and All*) the reader’s clear access to the subject at hand. There are all kinds of reasons to do this, of course. But, the magic of poetry is (as happens often in *Spring and All*) when the frustration in the reality of language (poetry) pivots somehow and intensifies the reader’s experience (prose) of the subjects at hand. In her short, tonal essay “Permeable Membrane,” Adrienne Rich wrote: “the medium is language intensified, intensifying our sense of possible reality” (96). That’s the music. I found all three of these functions of language (clarity, frustration, intensification) in *The Muse is Music.* But, clearly, along with an almost vertiginous account of poetic variousness and diversity in jazz resonant writing and performance, Meta DuEwa Jones’s own poetics has intensified our sense of possible critical practice.

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