

In the Event: An Introduction

If it keeps on rainin',
 levee's goin' to break
 If it keeps on rainin',
 levee's goin' to break
 And all these people have no place to
 stay.
 —Memphis Minnie

Obviously, if there is an event, it must
 never be something that is predicted or
 planned, or even really decided upon.
 —Derrida

Constructive criticism for Plantation
 lords.
 watch out.
 —Walker

*I*n the weeks immediately following Hurricane Katrina's landfall, the enemies were clear and easy to name. Or so it seemed to New Orleanians. Dispersed across the region and the nation, the city's displaced residents labored through their distraction to construct a roll call of the dishonorable and the blameworthy. In online forums, television interviews, and phone calls to family, they identified the agents of destruction by name: "Dubya," "Dick," FEMA, the Levee Board, "Brownie," Blanco, Nagin, the Army Corps of Engineers. Katrina. When those same New Orleanians were finally permitted to return to the city, they contrived a new medium of public discourse through which they continued to call those names: the Katrina refrigerator.

This discourse was entirely contingent upon its scene of enunciation. Prohibited from reentering the city for three weeks or more, with their length of exile determined by their neighborhood of residence, those New Orleanians who did make it back and who found their homes still standing and (in some basic way) habitable confronted an outsized mess. Many of us have seen the images of mold-covered walls and belongings scattered

across dead lawns. Like the graffiti that Susan Stewart describes in *Crimes of Writing*, those sunlit and waterlogged diaries, photographs, and collectibles made for uncomfortable viewing. It was as though New Orleanians had “put their subjectivity in the wrong place” (223). Or rather had it put there for them. These materials constituted an “interruption of the boundaries of public and private space,” and they dissolved the “claims of street, façade, exterior, and interior by which the city is articulated” (216).

For locals, one of the most indelible memories of the post-Katrina landscape has to do with the sight of the forlorn and abandoned “iceboxes” lining the area’s streets and the specific form of public writing they induced. With the power shut off for weeks, the abandoned city’s refrigerators turned into hotboxes rendered useless by what transpired inside of them. As the returnees deposited their wrecked refrigerators curbside for collection, they could not resist the impulse to declaim and once again to name. It was as though the years of taping notes and lists to refrigerator doors, as well as those coy magnetic poetry kits, had primed the city for this moment. The spirit of William Carlos Williams descended. A chapbook of photographs entitled *Spoiled* (2005) documents these refrigerators (Varisco). One—cold white and strapped shut with grey duct tape—has spray painted in large black block letters across its front door: “SMELLS LIKE FEMA.” On the side of another model bound with twine: “DICK & DUBYA INC.” Prosecuting the case against a more local perpetrator in red paint rather than black: “LEVEE BOARD VICTIM.” And most concisely, painted below a magnetic calendar still stuck to a door, the given name (now coupled with a misogynistic epithet) that appeared to name it all and thereby to define this as a singular event: “KATRINA, YOU BITCH.”

In the months and years that have followed, the local tenor of the complaint has shifted; so has its vehicle: from the given name to the family name, from the singular to the categorical. This shift first registered in my consciousness during a trip to New Orleans about six months into the “recovery” to visit family members. My nephews—aged four and two at the time—anticipated what would eventually become the characteristic mode of referencing what had come to pass. In the precocious way of children, their language predicted the new semiotic of their community before it had fully emerged. They erected a small city made from blankets, chairs, and toys; then they proceeded to destroy it. They were playing a game they called “storm.”

That word would come to dominate the lexicon of post-Katrina New Orleans. As in: “How did your family do in *the storm*?” or “When did

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you come back after *the storm*?” or “They didn’t reopen after *the storm*.” Although given names still surfaced (as they continue to do) and no official decision was taken to prohibit the phrase “Hurricane Katrina,” New Orleanians increasingly communicated with each other in terms that seemed to argue the inadequacy of the name itself—not just this name, Katrina, but any given name. In this new linguistic economy, what had come to pass was generalized. Where given names seek to mark the difference of the individual from the family, “the storm” is categorical. Notwithstanding the definite article, to call what had happened *the storm* is to shift it one step away from the realm of the fully contingent, the historically unique, the absolutely singular. From one familiar perspective, it is in this sense to strip what happened of its eventfulness by making categorical resemblances reappear.

In undertaking this lexical shift, New Orleanians were not, strictly speaking, striking out on their own. In *After the Deluge* (2007), a book that emerged from an installation/exhibition she created for the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the artist Kara Walker writes the following:

At this book’s inception, the narrative of Hurricane Katrina had shifted precipitously away from the hyperreal horror show presented to the outside world as live coverage of a frightened and helpless populous (relayed by equally frightened and helpless reporters) to a more assimilable legend. Lately, the narrative of the disaster has turned to “security failures,” or “the question of race and poverty,” or “rebirth.” I’ve heard harrowing anecdotes of survival and humorous tales of rancid refrigerators. And always at the end of these tales, reported on the news, in newspapers, and by word of mouth, always there is a puddle—a murky, unnavigable space that is overcrowded with intangibles: shame, remorse, vanity, morbidity, silence. (7)

Walker’s comments indicate a certain unease with this process of recuperation, the moment when the puddle and its overcrowded residents are stepped over. She describes the spread of euphemistic narratives stripped of euphemism’s capacity for consolation. For Walker, as for many who have analyzed the event as a category of experience and analysis, the event is a specific intrusion into the everyday, unsuited for assimilation to the already known. In this sense, the event is a privileged site of the new. It is invested with an uneasy form of hope: the hope that there might be something other than now, accompanied by the fearful knowledge that the

shape of the new will exceed what we know. To call what came to pass in New Orleans simply *the storm* would seem to overwrite this unprecedented specificity of the event, as well as the hope and fear it entails.

From Derrida, we learn:

An event is always exceptional. This is one possible definition of the event. An event must be exceptional, an exception to the rule. Once there are rules, norms, and hence criteria to evaluate this or that, what happens and what doesn't happen, there is no event. (457)

To call an event a “storm” is to reduce it to a category already known. It is to take a novel circumstance and strip it of its singularity. William Sewell’s recent account of the event as a useful category for the writing of history, which builds upon Marshall Sahlin’s event-based arguments in the field of anthropology, suggests that any event worthy of the name produces transformations in the larger social structures that embrace it, such that the old names no longer mean what they once meant. Calling something *the storm* gives the impression of evading this circumstantial novelty.

The process of nominative generalization described here emerges even in specific gestures that seek to contract the frame of naming and to designate the terms of New Orleans’s demise. Spike Lee’s decision to entitle his HBO documentary *When the Levees Broke* (2006) represents a deliberate response to the naturalizing, “de-eventing” of what had happened to New Orleans. Lee’s title and indeed his movie make a specific claim about the precise nature of the Katrina event. Like the movie, Lee’s title proposes that it was not Hurricane Katrina itself but rather the nation-state’s failure to maintain the city’s levees and their subsequent collapse that was to blame for the city’s loss. Refusing the perception that what happened in New Orleans was a natural disaster (as Hayden White indicates in his contribution to this issue, there are “no ‘tragedies’ in nature”), Lee insists that what happened deserves to be thought of as a historical event—a moment involving “surprise, exposure, the unanticipatable” (Derrida 441). Yet, in naming his account *When the Levees Broke*, Lee also signifies upon an old Memphis Minnie blues song, “When the Levee Breaks” (1929), written in part to commemorate the Flood of 1927—one refrain of which opens this introduction. As the Mississippi River’s waters rose in the spring of 1927, threatening to breach New Orleans’s levees, black New Orleanians were forced by government agencies to shore up those levees. Their labor was not relieved until it was decided to blast open the levees

downriver from the city and flood the River Parishes (Kelman 171–96). If Lee assimilates the Hurricane of 2005 to the Flood of 1927, Walker herself ultimately effects a similar recouping of the more recent moment of loss. Despite her palpable distaste for the predictable narrativization of Hurricane Katrina and its redefinition in terms of the already known, Walker suggests the following:

The story that has interested me is the story of Muck [. . .]. Black life, urban and rural Southern life, is often related as if it were an entity with a shadowy beginning and a potentially heroic future, but with a soul that is crippled by racist psychosis. One theme in my artwork is the idea that a Black subject in the present tense is a container for specific pathologies from the past and is continually growing and feeding off those maladies. Racist pathology is the Muck, aforementioned. (8, 9)

Here, Hurricane Katrina effects a Muck that is continuous with rather than a marked break from what has come before. Walker's words and the imagery she chose to include in the installation/exhibition that precipitated her book oscillate: between placing Hurricane Katrina in what Saidiya Hartman, following Fernand Braudel and the *Annales* historians, has called the *longue durée* of racial slavery, and seeking to particularize it as an event in a manner the *Annales* school would have rejected. From the first perspective, Katrina was not only not unpredictable; its place in a centuries-old social structure is all too easy to identify. Walker's Muck recalls "de muck" of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), as well as the hurricane and economic injustice upon which that novel's plot turns. In this context, the appropriate response to Lee's title, *When the Levees Broke*, would seem to be something like: Which time? Which levees? From the second, more event-worthy perspective, the Muck, the storm might be thought of as a substitution for that which is so new we cannot yet name it—a placeholder for something not yet fully present to cognition.

The pressing, silent question here is how one might do justice to the event, where justice is understood to be the taking of an event's full measure. That fundamental question can only be answered, however, once this one has been addressed: how do we know an event has happened? It seems generally clear that an event cannot be announced in advance. Derrida suggests that the event must fall upon us vertically; it must come from a place that never functions as anyone's horizon. But what other

qualities signify the present or passing appearance of an event deserving of that signature?

As several of the essays below suggest, it may be precisely the oscillating indecision described above that signals the presence of an event. The idiomatic phrase “I’ll know it when I see it” gains a certain analytic force here. The event cannot be known until it is seen. The moment that it is seen, however, it begins to slip away from us: it is “never decided upon.” The attention paid here to the event suggests that as it slips away from us, the event draws us across conventional chronological and cartographical divisions of time and space. This capacity for offering a measure different from the clock, the calendar, the empirical map, has long been the attraction of the notion of the event. Here, that capacity is suggested in a collection of essays that “cross-stitch” time and space, to borrow Wai Chee Dimock’s useful phrasing. Hayden White identifies flash points when the event has preoccupied Western philosophy and, in particular, theories of history. Dimock indicates how attending to one particular event, Hurricane Katrina, can demonstrate the inadequacy of the national frame for an ethical relationship to history and democracy. Jonathan Elmer shows how the participants in what would appear to be a clear-cut case of historical eventfulness, such as the Haitian revolution, might fail to recognize it (and themselves) as such. Andrew Aisenberg points to a model of social knowledge—Pierre Bourdieu’s account of habitus—forged in relationship to the event of the Algerian War and that refuses to abstract the particular conditions of Algerian life. Rebecca Wanzo explains how (white) girls’ bodies become events, and how other (brown) girls’ bodies are denied event status. Akira Mizuta Lippit traces the exteriorization of the heart onto the other precipitated by the event of the end. In each of these essays, the conventional expectation that “the event” is a phenomenon of punctuality or simultaneity is frustrated. The event in this sense perhaps offers an alternative to the mode of historicism currently dominating the study of culture. In the event, as it were, an alternative to the present might in fact emerge.

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