Epilogue

Apocalypse South, *Redux*—Searching for Meaning after the Flood

If it keep on rainin' the levee gonna break
If it keep on rainin' the levee gonna break
Some of these people don't know which road to take

...If it keep on rainin' the levee gonna break
If it keep on rainin' the levee gonna break
Some people still sleepin', some people are wide awake
—Bob Dylan, “The Levee's Gonna Break”

WRITING IN the aftermath of the hurricane and flood that nearly destroyed his city, the New Orleans poet Peter Cooley struggled mightily and profoundly to wrest meaning from devastation:

I see a city in tears
abomination of desolation,
odies of the drowned afloat in back streets,
graves of the dead buried above ground spring
open and skeletons whole and in pieces
set out to decimate the morning light.
And he said: that is better. But what else?
Then I answered: my words are little, poor. (61)

Cooley is hardly alone in his frustration to articulate something coherent and meaningful about Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent deluge; the sentiment of poetic inadequacy that is expressed in “I See a City in Tears” is shared by many of the other poems published alongside it in the 2006
anthology Hurricane Blues: Poems about Katrina and Rita. These emotions should not surprise. The images broadcast around the globe in the days and weeks following Katrina do not yield easily to our conventional ways of speaking—in particular, to the discourse of American national identity.

The imagery of this poem—and the images that emerged from the Gulf Coast in August and September of 2005—engage the conventions of Apocalypse. Indeed, while Katrina-writing is recognizable in the frequency of terms like levee, breach, and FEMA trailer and references to now-nationally familiar local geographic identifiers, including the Industrial Canal and Lower Ninth Ward, one might also designate the genre by its tone, which is frequently if not uniformly, apocalyptic. In his book about Katrina, New Orleans Times-Picayune editor Jed Horne describes the view from I-10 in the hours before landfall:

Within twenty-four hours [of the mandatory evacuation order], mobile signboards would go up at key junctions across the interstate system that converged on southeast Louisiana, the lettering picked out in flashing amber dots against a black background: NEW ORLEANS EXITS CLOSED. Blink. NEW ORLEANS EXITS CLOSED—and suddenly, a name once evocative of elegance and devil-may-care good times, a haven of sophistication in the hardscrabble South, carried overtones of catastrophe: a Babylon, a Chernobyl. Blink. NEW ORLEANS EXITS CLOSED. (40)

Horne’s description of the scene is hardly anomalous: a quick Lexus-Nexus search for combination of the terms “Katrina,” “New Orleans,” and “Apocalypse” or “apocalyptic” since the storm yields 460 articles.1 Rolling Stone’s lead piece on the storm, for instance, was entitled “Apocalypse There” (Taibbi 102–45).

Throughout this book, I have argued that Apocalypse is a site in need of excavation; that it is a discourse capable of condemning outsiders and maintaining stable, hegemonic notions of place, race, and gender; that it offers an alternative narrative space in which oppressed communities can articulate their own prophetic historical visions; that its occurrence suggests the presence of concealed historical meaning; and that its vision of vindication and retribution provides individuals and communities a vehicle to work through traumatic suffering. This examination of Apocalypse would be incomplete if it did not reckon with this recent southern catastrophe—a singular event that inspired each of the four different uses of

1. This search was conducted on 10 March 2012.
apocalyptic discourse investigated by this book. In no time in recent years
has the landscape of the apocalyptic imaginary come so close to materiality
in the South as it did in the Crescent City in late 2005. With the popula-
tion all but disappeared, the remaining residents endured a hellish, seem-
ingly endless isolation; homes and neighborhoods were inundated with
toxic waters; the infrastructure and institutions of civic authority largely
collapsed; and a semblance of order was restored finally only through the
imposition of martial law. Not coincidentally, the discourses of cataclysm
and destruction, rebirth and renewal, judgment and justice have been
indispensable in the rhetoric of postdiluvian New Orleans. In concluding
Apocalypse South, this epilogue will deploy the various models of literary
engagement with the apocalyptic imaginary identified in the earlier chap-
ters in order to better understand representations of this historical event.
Specifically, it will examine the voices of condemnation and scapegoating
that followed the flood, approaches to the flood that fit within the pro-
phetic traditions of the American and African American jeremiads, the
possibility of historical revelation suggested by John Biguenet’s 2006 play
Rising Water, and the apocalyptic possibility of hope and deliverance that
is central to the cultural identity of New Orleans. My aim is not simply to
further argue for the southern apocalyptic imaginary as a viable theoretical
model, but rather, to make a case for the utility the works examined herein
offer to broader efforts to understand the genealogy of southern catas-
trophes and cataclysms and even to articulate responses to these events
that are grounded in the particular textures of the communities that suffer
through them.

“Playing the Blame Game”:
Condemnation and Scapegoating after the Flood

In the days following the flood, President George W. Bush steadfastly
refused to assign fault. “Look, there will be plenty of time to play the
blame game,” he told reporters with frustration (Curl A04). Despite this
cautionsing otherwise, the assignations of guilt were widespread, and the
phenomena of scapegoating and collective persecution were played out in
public comments from officials and activists. Thus, while poets and New
Orleanians (Peter Cooley being both) may have struggled to articulate a
coherent narrative about the flood, others found Katrina’s meaning to be
self-evident: a vengeful God had laid this modern Sodom to waste. New
Orleans is no stranger to such condemnations; the pamphleteers, pros-
elytizers, and self-proclaimed prophets who rail against the wickedness of the fallen world with a righteous fury, recalling Faulkner's Doc Hines, have become familiar sights on Bourbon Street and elsewhere, particularly during Mardi Gras. One should not, then, be particularly surprised by the blogs, press releases, and emails that were blasted out by media savvy fundamentalist and evangelical political activists. For instance, South Carolina anti-abortion advocate Steve Lefemine told the Washington Post article that the image of an eight-week-old fetus was visible in the satellite images of the storm as it landed on the Gulf Coast and that this image proved the storm and flood to be the act of an angry God (A27). The same article also quoted Michael Marcavage of Repent America, who cited the storm’s disruption of the annual gay and lesbian event “Southern Decadence” as evidence of God’s intentions. “We take no joy in the death of innocent people,” Marcavage told the Post. “But we believe that God is in control of the weather. . . . The day Bourbon Street and the French Quarter was flooded was the day that 125,000 homosexuals were going to be celebrating sin in the streets. . . . We’re calling it an act of God.”

Marcavage’s willingness to speak for the All-Knowing aside, Bourbon Street and the Quarter remained all but undamaged and quickly reopened for business as usual. In fact, the storm itself wrought relatively little damage to New Orleans—the eastern edge of coastal Louisiana and the Mississippi Gulf Coast bore the brunt of its monstrous impact. These distinctions mattered little to Marcavage and the Rev. Dr. Wiley Bennett, the pastor of Woodland Hills Baptist Church in Tyler, Texas. When evacuees poured into his town, Bennett saw fit to emblazon the church’s marquee with a message for them: “THE BIG EASY IS THE MODERN DAY SODOM AND GOMORRAH.” “What I was trying to do was point out that the wickedness of the city of New Orleans brought a hand of judgment on that city,” Bennett told reporters. “It was never put up there with the intention of saying there are no good people in the city of New Orleans. That was a misunderstanding. People took it wrong” (Falsani A4).

Despite their best efforts, the fame Lefemine, Marcavage, and Bennett garnered receded far more quickly than did the flood waters on Canal Street. And while it may be tempting to dismiss such sentiments as little more than ideological extremism, their echoes are disconcertingly audible in the remarks of public figures with far greater authority and far larger audiences. On October 3, 2005, the Rev. Franklin Graham, son of Billy Graham and heir to his father’s ministry, offered a convoluted message at Jerry Falwell’s Liberty University. In his speech, Graham did not attribute the destruction to a wrathful deity but refused to dismiss any claim
that such punishment might be warranted. “I’m not saying that God used this storm as a judgment,” he told the audience, before decrying Mardi Gras, voodoo, and the acceptance of homosexuality as “adverse to Christian beliefs.” “There’s been satanic worship,” he continued. “There’s been sexual perversion. God is going to use that storm to bring revival” (Seltzer 1H). Similarly, in his weekly self-distributed column, Alabama state senator and one-time local conservative radio personality Hank Irwin (R-Montevallo) wrote, “New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast have always been known for gambling, sin and wickedness. It is the kind of behavior that ultimately brings the judgment of God” (“Alabama Legislator: Katrina was God’s wrath on sinful coast” A14). Richard Baker, the ten-term Republican congressman from Louisiana’s sixth district (which includes Baton Rouge and communities just to the west of New Orleans), offhandedly told lobbyists that public housing in New Orleans had “finally [been] cleaned up. . . . We couldn’t do it, but God did” (Babbington A4).

While I have heretofore applied this model of Apocalypse to works of fiction, it proves to be equally useful in an examination of these comments. Echoes of Doc Hines’s demagoguery in *Light in August* and Rev. Barden’s sermonizing in *A Visitation of Spirits* can be heard in the condemnation and scapegoating that followed the storm. Michael Marcarvage posits Katrina’s disruption of the Southern Decadence festival as evidence of the hand of a wrathful, anthropomorphic God, angered by such willful flaunting of Levitical prohibition of homosexuality. Marcarvage cites the French Quarter, where “125,000 homosexuals” would have been “celebrating sin in the streets,” as the epicenter of God’s wrath. Marcarvage was apparently uninterested in facts that might trouble his contention (for instance, Bourbon Street and the rest of the Quarter remained dry, while the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary was underwater, along with hundreds of churches). Likewise, he seemed unconcerned with the difficult theodical questions that such events provoke. Suffering and destruction on this scale unsettle notions of causality and moral order, and Marcarvage’s apocalyptic rhetoric, like Hines’s and Barden’s, displaces the troubling ambiguity of an experience by locating an ambiguous figure as its cause. As long as the aberrant presence can be rhetorically contained, the stable social order for which they nostalgically yearn can still seem divinely sanctioned, and the exceptional status of their community of believers can remain unquestioned.

Like the distorted gospels exhorted by Faulkner’s and Kenan’s preachers, Marcarvage’s message represents more than an extreme and exaggerated version of evangelical religious belief. Investigation into the particular
operations of his rhetoric provides insight into the implications of scapegoating and collective persecution in secular, ostensibly objective representations and responses to the disaster. More pervasive and perhaps more insidious than these apocalyptic condemnations was the scapegoating perpetrated by the popular media in its overwrought concern with looting and their rush to broadcast rumors of horrific violence around the city. “The events that followed in the wake of Hurricane Katrina were spun into legends even as they were happening,” writes historian and former New Orleans resident Douglas Brinkley. “Rumors were folded into the news cycle and repeated as fact before they could be corroborated or checked” (572). For instance, though stories of “rampant murder” in the Superdome persisted, none were committed. In Jed Horne’s assessment of media coverage, “The aggregate portrait was of a city gone mad, a black city, a city of depraved men and women who would walk away from asthmatic children and leave them to die, if they didn’t violate them first” (108). Enthralled by what Horne calls “the biggest story of their careers,” reporters sought to articulate the chaos that ensued in coherent form. With little consideration (and, indeed, little time) for nuance or complexity, they churned out stories that in effect established the victims as the perpetrators of their own suffering. The logic that would assign blame for this event (in the case of Marcarvage) to a gay man on vacation perhaps seems ridiculous in a culture that no longer is predicated upon notions of an anthropomorphic, interventionist God; in the end, it is no more problematic than the criminalization and condemnation of a waterlogged group of people stealing dry shoes. Such was the consequence of the images of looters in the flooded stores along Canal Street, endlessly looping on the cable news channels without sufficient explanation. In both instances, the scapegoating mechanism displaces the deeply, existentially troubling questions of theology, theodicy, politics, and ethics posed by the storm; by the mounting death toll; by the masses stranded at the Superdome and the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center; by the people waiting for help on their roofs; and by the elderly, baking in their attics before finally succumbing to heat exhaustion.\(^2\) As is too often the case, however, these very real, very com-

\(^2\) The last several years have seen the proliferation of books on the 2005 storms, and each of them contains accounts of episodes like these. The best among these included Douglas Brinkley’s *The Great Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, and the Mississippi Gulf Coast* (New York: William Morrow, 2006), Jed Horne’s *Breach of Faith: Hurricane Katrina and the Near Death of a Great American City* (New York: Random House, 2006), Chris Rose’s *1 Dead in Attic: After Katrina* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007), Dave Eggers’s *Zeitoun* (New York: McSweeney’s, 2009), and Josh Neufeld’s comic oral history *A.D.: New
Complicated concerns of politics and policy, of infrastructure and economy, and of morality and human rights, are displaced in favor of a more readily intelligible scapegoat and easy narratives of blame and punishment. As with the townspeople of *Light in August* and the congregation in *A Visitaton of Spirits*, those who invoke the apocalyptic imaginary in this manner do so to discursively stabilize nation and community. When Apocalypse is deployed in this manner, the chaos and suffering that followed Katrina seem not the consequence of any policy, but rather, the fault of an aberrant few who must be pushed to the nation’s margins.

**Katrina and the (African) American Jeremiad**

While Marcarvage and his cohort assign blame to a population they consider aberrant, other Katrina apocalypticists avoided the trap of the scapegoat and blamed the nation and the communities to which they themselves belonged. In doing, these figures evoked the long rhetorical traditions of the American and African American jeremiads, and positioned the aftermath of the storm as a divine call for moral, spiritual, and civic renewal. Even New Orleans’s then mayor, Ray Nagin, jumped onto the apocalyptic bandwagon. According to James Varney of the *Times-Picayune*, Nagin’s unprepared remarks suggested “that a vengeful God smote New Orleans with Hurricane Katrina because of heavenly disapproval of America’s involvement in Iraq and of rampant violence within urban black communities” and that New Orleans’s black majority would reclaim their “Chocolate City” because God willed it so (A1).

At the same event, according to the *Times-Picayune*, several pastors, representing some of the most devastated neighborhoods, argued that the city “served as an example of divine judgment . . . the Rev. Dennis Watson of Celebration Church decried the area’s sins of ‘corruption, racism, slavery, violence, division among Christians and Mardi Gras’” (Nolan LIVING4). Watson’s remarks suggest the complicated possibilities and pitfalls of apocalyptic rhetoric. The “sins” he enumerates are the very things the apocalyptic judgments of others work to obfuscate and elide—and the very things Richard Wright sought to expose in *Uncle Tom’s Children*. By equating social injustice with sin, and assigning the destruction of storm

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and flood to the hand of an angry God, he imparts an ultimate urgency to social action: essentially, repent or be destroyed. However, when he exhorts the audience to abandon the revelry of Mardi Gras in favor of an explicitly Christian moral code, he reinforces the bivalent epistemologies for which undifferentiation and ambiguity are anathema. This rejection of ambiguity is not limited to sexual licentiousness, but rather pervades Watson’s invocation of Apocalypse. While his jeremiad begins by noting that the conditions of post-flood New Orleans are the products of a complicated constellation of material, economic, and social injustices, it ultimately rejects that complexity in favor of a reductive cause-and-effect model rooted in a prophetic tradition: we have failed in moral obligation; some have already been punished for their sins, while punishment awaits others, perhaps to be meted out in the final judgment. Indeed, any number of methodologies might be used to explain the power of the storm, the failure of the levees, and the shameful response by all levels of government. Unfortunately, these various disciplinary discourses—meteorology, hydrology, engineering, economics, education, public policy, partisan politics, ethics, and social justice, among others—are not immediately compatible. Watson’s best attempt to generate an intelligible call for justice out of this contemporary Babel is compelling, but ultimately reductive.

Other jeremiahs turned to secular rhetorical traditions in their attempts to make sense of the devastation. Just over a month after the storm, *Vanity Fair* featured a piece by the famed journalist David Halberstam entitled “Hell and High Water—American Apocalypse: New Orleans 2005.” “The scenes were at once familiar and unfamiliar,” Halberstam begins (385), before immediately invoking several of the standard indices of Apocalypse: chaos, contradiction, hybridity, and the interpretive difficulty they provoke. Halberstam points to the conventional formulas of cable news which shaped coverage of the storm and flood: “First, there are the tragedy and the tears; then, in time, the redemption, the rejuvenation, and the gratitude.” Despite their generic packaging, the images that emerged disconcerted even the veteran war correspondent:

... it was unfamiliar as well, because when the damage is this catastrophic, the people so helpless, the government so weak and clumsy, we expect it to take place somewhere else—on the coast of Sri Lanka

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3. In fact, such undifferentiation is a hallmark, not just of Mardi Gras, but of the carnivalesque, which, according to Bakhtin, involves the “temporary suspension of all hierarchic distinctions and barriers among men . . . and of the prohibitions of usual life” (*Rabelais and His World* 15).
or Bangladesh, for instance—somewhere distant and poor. We do not expect to see so many fellow Americans overwhelmed, unable to help themselves and unable to escape the disaster. We do not expect to see our government so impotent and indifferent that it is completely paralyzed at the most critical moment. We do not expect to see the story play out so slowly and the cavalry arrive so late.

Was this really us? Was this really an American city coming apart—or drowning—as we watched? Were all these poor people, whose lives were broken, and some of whom looted their own city, really Americans? Aren’t we better than this? Aren’t we different?

Here, Halberstam troubles the notions of American exceptionalism in a quintessentially American, liberal fashion: he questions whether the nation has lived up to a righteous vision of American nationalism, rather than questioning the righteousness of that vision. For Halberstam, that remains a matter of received knowledge, just as it was for the writers, thinkers, and leaders catalogued in Sacvan Bercovitch’s seminal *The American Jeremiad*. These American jeremiahs, like Halberstam centuries later, “simultaneously lament[ed] a declension and celebrat[ed] a national dream” (Bercovitch 180). In this discourse, the institutions of nation may have failed to realize its core principles, but those ideologies (and eschatology) remain true. Thus, while Halberstam makes no specific reference to Apocalypse in the body of the piece, “Apocalypse Now and Then” proved a more apt title than *Vanity Fair*’s editors might have realized: the questions he poses are those of Apocalypse. They are the questions of a citizen seeking to interpret the images before him; to contextualize them within a historical discourse in which they do not easily fit; to make sense of that incongruity; and to discover what previously hidden element of human experience has suddenly come unavoidably into our view in this moment of cataclysm. And they are, in fact, the same sorts of questions posed by the works of Faulkner, Wright, Allison, and Kenan. Rather than consigning blame to an abject few, each work reveals our own implication in some historical reality that does not square with the dominant narrative of their communities.

The Possibility of Revelation and Renewal

Given the frequency of apocalyptic imagery in the reportage of the New Orleans disaster, it should be no surprise that the first long-form literary attempt to grapple with the storm, John Biguenet’s 2007 play *Rising*
Water, employs apocalyptic structures and suggests the apocalyptic promises of revelation and renewal. Biguenet’s play depicts a middle-aged New Orleans couple, Sugar and Camille, in the late evening and early morning of Monday and Tuesday, August 29 and 30, 2005. In the first act, the rising flood waters drive the couple into the attic of their single-story home; there, they are prompted by forgotten items to reconsider their past. In Act II, Camille escapes onto the roof through a small hole; Sugar, “no longer slender,” according to the stage directions (2), can only reach his head and one arm through the hole. Trapped with no means of communication and no source of information, Sugar and Camille are profoundly isolated within the very city that has nurtured them, their relationship, and their family for generations. In their isolation, they are prompted to revisit a past they have long-since ignored and to consider the future of a marriage that has given way to the malaise of middle age. The possibilities of revelation and renewal, then, are located in the domestic space of home and family. Sitting atop her roof in Act II, Camille tells her husband (again, whose head is all that is visible), “In this moonlight, everything looks so strange, so fresh. Maybe it’s not the end of the world, this rising water . . . our past is being washed away. It’s left us sort of standing on a mountaintop up here, like Noah’s Ark coming to rest after all that rain” (52).

However, as Sugar reminds her and as the flood waters attest (and, indeed, as we have seen in the lynching of Joe Christmas, the tragic violence depicted throughout Uncle Tom’s Children, the abandonment of Allison’s Ruth Anne Boatwright, and the suicide of Kenan’s Horace Cross), the contradictions of history, which have been buried or repressed in order to maintain coherence, have a nasty way of revisiting themselves upon us. Indeed, the insights of the play are not limited to a single couple. The focus of their conversations frequently shifts from their neglected marriage to the collapse of the neglected and aging infrastructure. The city remains a constant presence in their discussions, and Biguenet’s choice of names prompts the audience to locate the characters and their experience in the flood within the complex genealogy of New Orleans: without the cash crop of sugar, there would perhaps be no New Orleans—and certainly not the plantation culture of south Louisiana and the international trade that were based upon it; “Camille,” of course, provokes recollections of—and comparisons with—the monster Category 5 of 1969 hurricane that barely skirted New Orleans and instead leveled much of the nearby Mississippi Gulf Coast. In sheer power, Camille dwarfed Katrina, which had been reduced to a Category 3 by the time it reached the Mississippi and Louisiana coasts; Biguenet’s Camille prompts the audience to contemplate how
lucky the city had been throughout its recent history of near-misses and how much worse the destruction might have been if Katrina had been a more powerful storm. Likewise, the audience is reminded that many New Orleanians, like Sugar and Camille, went to bed on that Monday evening in 2005, believing that their charmed city had once again dodged the proverbial bullet.

Like the various entities charged with protecting the city, Sugar and Camille have too long ignored or avoided the most difficult questions facing them and have been content instead to simply maintain the prosaic rhythms of life in the Crescent City. At first, Sugar contends the flood is perhaps a matter of plumbing or perhaps the failure of one of the city’s aging pumps. “Probably the city’s pumps backed up. Or maybe one of them went down,” he tells his wife (11). Surprisingly, his nonchalant response to the rising flood is predicated on a familiar faith in the city’s infrastructure that contradicts his awareness of its decaying condition: “A miracle they work at all as old’s they are.” Later, however, he becomes less certain. As he explains to Camille, if one of the aging pumps fails, the other pumps will have to compensate, and the additional load might cause the entire system to fail “[u]ntil it floods. . . . That’s how everything works down here. One piece fails, the whole thing falls apart” (12). While the failure of the pumping system seems possible, Sugar’s faith in the levees is unshakable—at least, in these early moments of the flood: “The U.S. Army built those things. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. You think they don’t know how to hold the water back. A levee’s not just mud. There’s steel inside. No way a storm like what we had today could breach a levee.” As

4. Civil engineer A. Baldwin Wood developed New Orleans’s massive pumping system and supervised its installation between 1913–15. The Wood pump, as it became known, drained much of the cypress “backswamp” between the original city and Lake Pontchartrain and thus allowed the first major expansion of the city beyond the original limits—the natural levees and ridges carved by the Mississippi upon which the French Quarter and the Garden District were constructed. According to John M. Barry, the Wood pumps were designed to move up to 47,000 cubic feet of water per second—“roughly half the low-water flow of the Mississippi itself”—through tunnels beneath the city, uphill, and over the levees and into the lake (228). Much of the original infrastructure remains in service, and modifications are still based upon Wood’s original designs. See also Bourne, “New Orleans—a Perilous Future,” 42.

According to Douglas Brinkley, the volume of water pouring into the city through the breached levees quickly overwhelmed the massive pumping system, and operators were evacuated by Monday evening (134). Aaron Broussard, then president of neighboring Jefferson Parish, has received much criticism for evacuating that parish’s pump operators before the system shut down, when the system might have been able to drain areas not yet as flooded as New Orleans itself (Brinkley 133–35; Horne 99–100).
the most obvious manifestation of federal authority in the community, the levees function as a metonym for the nation. Interestingly, Sugar is far more willing to entertain the failure of the pumps (emblematic of municipal infrastructure) than to consider the possibility that the levees (and, by implication, the institutions of the most powerful nation on earth) have failed.

Thus, while the action on stage is limited to Camille’s and Sugar’s home and the bulk of the narrative is focused upon the particularities of their relationship, the broader questions of policy posed by the flood remain a constant presence. Even in these first hours of the unfolding disaster, the flood disrupts narratives of millenarian nationalism by confronting U.S. citizens with the catastrophic failures of institutions purporting to protect them. The levees along the Industrial and Seventh Street Canals, designed to insure New Orleans’s position as a hub of global trade, were hurriedly constructed with little oversight over corrupt officials and fraudulent contractors and little consideration of the long-term effects of slicing up the wetlands outside the city. These wetlands, which would have absorbed the brunt of storm surge, have disappeared at a shocking rate. Other low-lying areas were drained with the aging pumps to encourage development during oil booms that served to facilitate white flight from the original city, the movement of the black middle class to new suburbs, and ultimately, the reduction of support for the decaying institutions and infrastructures that served the city’s poorest residents.5

Likewise, while the play does not explicitly engage the apocalyptic narratives of judgment offered by fundamentalist commentators who would posit the destruction of the storm as the consequence of sexual licentiousness in New Orleans, it presents a scenario of abandonment that challenges the fundamentalist belief in the Rapture. Clearly, Camille and Sugar’s isolation is no fault of their own but rather a consequence of material fac-

5. Craig Colten is the authority on New Orleans’s geography, and his book, An Unnatural Metropolis offers the most comprehensive account. Barry’s Rising Tide details the history of the Mississippi levee construction. For specific information on the failure of New Orleans’s levees during Katrina, see Horne 145–67; Bourne 32–68. Both Horne and Bourne rely on interviews with Ivor van Heerden, the deputy director of LSU’s Hurricane Center. Van Heerden has written his own book (with journalist Mike Bryan), The Storm: What Went Wrong and Why During Hurricane Katrina—the Inside Story from One Louisiana Scientist (New York: Viking, 2006). Finally, the most thorough and authoritative investigation remains the Independent Levee Investigation Team’s 700-plus-page report, Investigation of the Performance of the New Orleans Flood Protection Systems in Hurricane Katrina on August 29, 2005 (Seed, Bea, et al., 2006), which is available in its entirety online at http://www.ce.berkeley.edu/projects/neworleans/ [accessed 28 Feb. 2012].
tors neither had ever considered. In direct challenge to any narrative that would blame victims, Camille becomes the play’s Jeremiah. She first questions a God that would allow this manner of devastation, but, after the still-faithful Sugar describes the flood as an act of men rather than of God, she offers blistering condemnation of those she believes to be responsible and announces a prophetic call for justice:

You and me, we’ve lost everything we own. How many people drowned in their own bedrooms since the sun went down? And it’s all because somebody cut some corners, didn’t pay attention to some detail, decided things were close enough to right and let it go at that? You telling me that’s why we’re trapped here in our own attic in the middle of the night with water lapping at the stairs? That’s the reason we could die tonight, you and me?

. . . If it’s not God responsible, then the men did this to us, I hope they never lie down in bed they don’t hear the ghosts of those they drowned tonight crying out for help. If I die tonight, I’ll never let them sleep, those murderers, I promise you. (38)

In this moment, the particularities of Sugar and Camille most obviously give way to the broader context of the storm; the political debates that will follow loom up but never overwhelm the characters or seem didactic. Nonetheless, the condemnation explicit here is pervasive, if subtly so, throughout the play and is most obvious in the couple’s stark, profound isolation, both in the text and on the stage. In the attic, they are surrounded, even overwhelmed, by the evidence of both the richness and the pain of their personal history.

In the second act, however, they are utterly alone and even separated from one another. Camille ascends to the roof first and reports on the “deadly quiet” of their neighborhood. “Nothing but the sound of water lapping at the roof,” she reports to Sugar. “No dogs, no motors, no human voices. Nothing. . . . Not a sound. No wind. No birds. Nobody knocking. Nothing but the sloshing of the water” (47). There is no evidence of community, as if all life has been erased from the surface of the earth. That isolation is not simply a matter of Camille’s description but also of mise-en-scène: for two acts, the audience sees nothing other than the couple and the space they occupy. In the claustrophobic space of a small attic, isolation seems perhaps the natural consequence of confinement. In the unrestrained space of rooftop, that isolation quickly becomes desolation. Camille anxiously implores her husband to join her on the roof, but he
can fit only his head and one arm through the hole. Consequently, the
floodwaters that have isolated them from their community now threaten
the integrity of the most intimate interpersonal unit—husband and wife.
Furthermore, Sugar himself is all but disembodied on stage: “I’m here with
you—just not all of me,” he good-naturedly reassures Camille (49). With
much of his body concealed, he is a fitting emblem of his hometown.

In the play’s final moments, wailing sirens signal the failure of the
neighborhood’s various water-logged home security systems rather than
the coming of any an official assistance. As their climactic scream fills the
theatre, the audience is discomfited by the contradiction of their proxim-
ity to Sugar and Camille and the insurmountable waters that threaten
them: rescue or escape is tantalizingly possible but never comes. Camille
and Sugar are alone on the stage with no other structure in sight and no
other person audible. And yet, as the sirens remind the audience, they are
trapped in the ostensibly safe space of a familiar American neighborhood.
The floodwaters even threaten to separate them from each other. The
infrastructures of a culture obsessed with personal and public security have
collapsed, proving incapable of preserving the integrity of even the small
unit of a married couple.

The call for judgment announced by Camille in Act I is continued by
these screaming sirens. The misfiring home or automobile alarm is an irri-
tant familiar to modern urban and suburban life, and the usual response
is annoyance: who or what set that off, and who will shut it off? In this
case, the first part of the question seems simple (the rising water did), but
it becomes more confusing in the face of the melancholy response to the
second part. That answer—no one—is disconcerting and should prompt
the audience to begin to work through the necessary questions of infra-
structure, politics, and policy that the flood demands we confront. Bigu-
enet does not employ these flood waters as a metaphor for repressed marital
and familial pain or Camille and Sugar's relationship as a metaphor for
their destroyed city. Rather, *Rising Water* realizes the apocalyptic nature of
catastrophe in its fullness: Apocalypse does not simply provide a familiar
vocabulary to represent destruction, but rather, it is a discourse in which
the various distinctions between past, present, and future collapse. It is a
present moment in which the veil that has concealed the contradictions
of the past is ripped away and in which we are prompted to consider the
possibilities of a new and unimagined future.

While the play questions and condemns, it neither yields answers nor
plots a future. *Rising Water* is a play about the flood, and it is likely that
post-Katrina art yet to come will seek to investigate what this play only
suggests: the genealogy and possibilities of a city below sea level, ringed by insufficient levees, most of the population of which lives in a poverty that was (and is) ignored within the prevailing political and economic discourse.

Justice, Deliverance, and Resistance

Combating the despair that results when we confront the tragedies, traumas, and catastrophes of late modernity is among the most important tasks facing contemporary artists, including those grappling with Katrina. “The gap between the words we write and read and the need for action is so much greater than any individual has the power to perform—that gap grows too large and I despair,” writes the native Louisianan (and famous apocalyptist) Tony Kushner. “Despair is a sin, I really believe that, but I am as I say a miserable sinner, and there are days after some nights I can’t even get out of bed” (58–59). Each of the writers with whom I have dealt in this project push and prod us out of our beds in such moments; they provoke the most important questions, and they provide the spiritual and intellectual sustenance that carries us through that process. By appropriating the apocalyptic rhetoric of condemnation to represent condemned people and condemned experiences, these works together constitute a legacy of southern resistance.

Such work is desperately needed now; as writers and artists attempt to wrest meaning from the near-destruction of New Orleans, they can look to Bone and Bastard Out of Carolina as a model. To work through this trauma, to make sense of the devastation their city has suffered, they will inevitably have to conjure hope in the face of cataclysm, renewal in the face of destruction, and justice in the face of criminal negligence. Just as the emancipatory potential of Apocalypse exists within the culture that condemns Bone and Kenan’s Horace Cross, that energy persists in the cultural DNA of New Orleans. Consider—or reconsider—the often-neglected words to a familiar song:

We are trav’ling in the footsteps
Of those who’ve gone before,
And we’ll all be reunited,
On a new and sunlit shore,

Oh, when the saints go marching in
Oh, when the saints go marching in  
Lord, how I want to be in that number  
When the saints go marching in

And when the sun refuses to shine  
And when the sun refuses to shine  
Lord, how I want to be in that number  
When the sun refuse to shine

Chorus  
And when the moon turns red with blood  
And when the moon turns red with blood  
Lord, how I want to be in that number  
When the moon turns red with blood

Chorus  
Oh, when the trumpet sounds its call  
Oh, when the trumpet sounds its call  
Lord, how I want to be in that number  
When the trumpet sounds its call

Chorus  
Some say this world of trouble,  
Is the only one we need,  
But I’m waiting for that morning,  
When the new world is revealed. (Lomax 541)

Like many spirituals, one could find many different variations on “When the Saints Go Marching In” (occasionally, “When the Saints Come Marching In”); Allen Lomax included a similar version in the seminal Folk Songs of North America (454). Pete Seeger recorded and regularly performed the lyrics presented above, and drawing from his songbook, The Beatles took it on in early demos. Several blues players, including Mississippian Fred McDowell, have used these apocalyptic verses, and in 2003, Dr. John and Mavis Staples recorded a “minor-key dirge [with] the kind of spooky, midnight-in-the-graveyard vibe,” which incorporated several, but not all, of these verses (Swenson). In 2006, while on tour with a raucous unplugged tribute to Pete Seeger, Bruce Springsteen regularly closed shows with this version. The first performance of that tour: the 2006 New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, just seven months after the flood.
Writing about the album of Seeger covers for his column for Springsteen’s hometown Asbury Park Press, Baptist minister Michael Riley argues that American folk music—familiar songs on the album, like “Ol’ Dan Tucker,” “Jesse James,” and “O Mary, Don’t You Weep”—is marked by a “sense of working for the kingdom of God [that] is muted in a lot of modern apocalyptic blather.” While the fantastic images out of Revelation might transfix audiences, they amount to “theology as science fiction,” according to Riley, and thus miss the point of Apocalypse:

Apocalyptic literature is written during times of hardship and persecution of those who see themselves as God’s people. . . . And the true message is simply and inevitably this: The world seems to be spinning out of control. Justice is a myth, and life is filled with sin and pain misery. But God still is in charge of history, he still loves his children and is working even now to deliver them from evil and bring them home.

Apocalyptic literature is a tract for hard times, and the message at the heart of it is simply: “Hold on.”

Perhaps we have heard “When the Saints Go Marching In” too many times. We hear (or read) march, and we think of parades, and perhaps we unconsciously replace it with dancing. But the full lyrics remind us that “When the Saints Go Marching In” resides squarely within the traditions delineated by Riley and that it is a statement of what Paul Gilroy terms “the revolutionary eschatology” of African American religion. This civic anthem is, in fact, a slave spiritual born of the need for hope; it nourished the spirits of those persevering in conditions so oppressive that they would defy any rational investigation and sustained their sense of injustice and deliverance when none came.

The apocalyptic hope of these forgotten lyrics words have been obscured or neglected over time. But when played again, they remind us to peel back the layers heaped onto this particular song and to look behind jazz tourism and beyond the Super Bowl trophy won by the NFL franchise that is its namesake. “When the Saints Go Marching In” is a sturdy artifact; its meaning does not threaten to turn to dust in our hands as we examine it. In fact, the deeper we dig, the more resonant it becomes until it finally becomes an agent of the very revelation it promises. Like those of each of the works this project has considered, its apocalyptic vision offers hope, but it does not suggest that we passively wait for deliverance. Rather, the hope it offers is a matter of persistent interpretive work—that is, of reading
the signs of these times, as well as those of the past, in order to bring into 
the realm of visibility those things that other narratives conceal. In our 
moments of deepest despair and in a world fraught with crisis and catastro-
phe, the promises of Apocalypse will get us out of bed in the morning and 
allow us to march forward.