

WATCH OUR SPIRITS RISE:

THE STORY OF NEW ORLEANS AS IT
RELATES TO RACE AND HURRICANE
KATRINA

By Sarah Passick

“Here we are. We’re in New Orleans,” my dad says, and I’m seeing it, this place I been dreaming about. It’s all jam-packety, pretty old houses lined up one beside the other, each one a different color, with curlicues and flowers, and, man, streets just full of people. White people, black people, mixed-raced people, all jumbled up together and walking. Music right on the sidewalk, and I don’t mean like one nigger with a guitar, but a whole band and drum set and everything, like the whole city is a big party...Everybody knows my name, and aunts and uncles I never heard of are crying and whooping and handing us around like sacks of corn. Googlobs of kids, man. These kids, they’re all over me, like, “You in the Ninth Ward.” Like it was a privilege. Like I might not measure up”

--Baum 39

*The hospital lobby was as frantic as the ramp at Charity, full
of gurneys, people running, shouting. What the fuck? The
Storm was over. Tim grabbed a doctor in a white coat.
"I need to put a body in the morgue."
"One of ours?"
"No, Killed on the street."
"No way."
"What do you mean?"
"I'm not going to establish a precedent by taking the city's
trash"*
--Baum 229

Slavery and Hurricane Katrina. White Man's burden, one in the same. Don't mistake 2010 for a post-racial America. It's not. That filthy racism still lives in the dirty, mucky water. Americans have disgraced each other by their treatment of fellow Americans, fellow human beings, African Americans. The brutal history of slavery remains in the United States and was ever-present in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. I cannot talk about New Orleans without talking about slavery, and I cannot talk about slavery without talking about Voodoo and the Mardi Gras Indians. I refuse to ignore the implications of Hurricane Katrina as it exposed discrimination and ethnic cleansing. Only when we have the courage to open our eyes do we see that in the harshest of lights: the issue of race dominates American culture.

"We know this place," says Sunni Patterson, a New Orleans spoken word poet whose intricate rhymes serve as living and breathing testaments to the historical and present day effects of race and discrimination in New Orleans. "We know this place," yes, we do, our people, our city. What makes New Orleans, New Orleans? I

have been grappling with this question from the moment I moved here in August 2007. I think that this question has always been lingering somewhere in my mind. There is certainly something different, something special about New Orleans. I want to tell you what it is; I want to show you how New Orleans came to be this way.

*And we know this place,
for we have seen more times than we'd like to imagine
bloated cadavers floating through waters of a city gone savage,
foraging the land for what can be salvaged.
But what can be saved when all is lost?
It happened in August, twenty-nine days in.
We are now five days out of the only place
we knew to call house and home (Patterson. Democracy Now)*

CAB DRIVER'S STORY:

I interviewed my cab driver last Saturday night on the way to Bourbon Street. The conversation was light at first, but I couldn't help but notice the intense aroma of a "new car." I asked him about it, and he said that this was his first new cab since Katrina. He had been driving trucks around the South and had finally moved back home. I asked him about his experience with Katrina. He had been working... two lovely ladies needed to go to the airport. He asked the women if he could stop home and get a few things... they agreed and so they went. But wait, a cab driver brought two women to his home and they got food for the road? What makes New Orleans, New Orleans I ask myself? Family, compassion, genuine selflessness. This is New Orleans. Yes it is true that in times of need people tend to have a certain air of compassion, but not like in New Orleans. He continued on about going from airport to airport as they shut down, and finally in Alabama they, not his family, but two strangers, were able to get on a flight home. He had a family – kids all over the place, a crazy ex-wife. He told me that New Orleans was a woman, a bitch, and you can't

help but both love and hate a bitch. He told me that this was a culture ingrained – a separate world, a state within a state. He told me that the people saved New Orleans, and the government failed them. This was a real man fighting back what seemed like years of tears talking about this place. This is why he came home. This is why they all came home.

*And we know this place.
Reclaim the crown.
Hold onto the prize,
never put it down.
Be firm in the stance,
no break, no bow,
got to forward on, Mama,
make your move now. Forward on, Papa,
make your move now.
Forward, dear children,
'cuz freedom is now (Patterson. Democracy Now)*

I cannot romanticize New Orleans or even discuss the current state of New Orleans without drawing from the past. I cannot ignore the work of Walter Johnson in *Soul by Soul*, where he shows that in the heart of the antebellum South, New Orleans was the largest slave market. I refuse to ignore the African American culture, which today still fights racism and distrust from the outside community. How do you watch the footage from the Convention Center and the Superdome and not think of slavery?

*Hell, it's hot wherever you be,
from the rooftop to the cell block,
step on up to the auction block,
and bend over,
touch your toes,*

show your teeth...

Yes, Sunni, American citizens smoldering on display, I thought we threw away those auction blocks. What the world witnessed was oppression at its height, and we watched. What if those were Tulane students lying dead in the water? Would the government have done something then? It's easy to get angry but that is not the point. I don't want to get angry. I want to understand, I want you to understand. I want to set the scene of a city that has never been just another American City. Ask Grace King who wrote "New Orleans: The Place and the People":

She [New Orleans] does not respond to the process. It seems to bore her. She is too impatient, indiscreet, too frank with her tongue, too free with her hand, and – this is confidential talk in New Orleans – The American millionaire is an impossible type to her. She certainly has been admonished enough by political economists: "Any one," say they, "who can forego a certain amount of pleasure can become rich," She retorts (retorts are quicker with her than reasons): "And anyone who can forego a certain amount of riches can have pleasure. (King xx)

Money, fear and time are secondary when you have the privilege of calling New Orleans

home. The impatience, the retorts, come from a city of people who refuse to succumb to the natural fears present in other cultures. The idea of pleasure and good times in the present are all that matter, because the prospect of tomorrow is never certain.

What is it that has really sustained New Orleans to continue to overcome her obstacles? To refuse to drown? There has never been a choice. The disgrace of her past is the art that paints her future. It is not just that the power of New Orleans lies in her ability to make beauty out of tragedy, art out of pain, and despair into humility. It is not just that spending the afternoon in the dense humidity of New

Orleans to feel the effect of her cool easy breeze or that New Orleans is a city rooted in her citizen's steadfast determination to carry the traditions of her family. We all know that in New Orleans family is the spice in the crawfish and the warm blanket for the cool nights once the sun has gone down, that family is buying the stranger next to you a beer after he has told you his troubles - when you only have five dollars left in your pocket. In New Orleans, we take pride in the stereotype that there exists the opportunity to forget greed, ignore the value of money, that time is always an afterthought. New Orleans reminds us to breathe baby, all we have is the here and the now.

New Orleans is home, a true and honest home. The people of New Orleans honor traditions the rest of the country is too preoccupied, too busy to observe. Only in New Orleans do three year olds beat to the sound of a second line, wave flags and scream as the Mardi Gras Indians go by. New Orleans culture is family. New Orleans is manifested by her culture, one that exists on the premise that the people could not imagine living anywhere other than New Orleans. In New Orleans, the African American culture is different because it is based around families living and sharing and staying together, united. The continuity of tradition is what makes them stay healthy and strong. How, you might ask, is it possible for a city of people to truly live like this? Because it is all of this, and not any of this that make New Orleans, New Orleans.

What truly distinguished New Orleans from the rest of the cities in America is that historically the people have faced death, and come back for more, for life. Every aspect of New Orleans culture reflects resilience. And so it remains a place that is so different from any other city because of one simple fact; the culture refuses to address fear, simply because there's no time for this indulgence. New Orleans would not be New Orleans if her people acknowledged fear. The culture of New Orleans, one based on the idea that nothing is final, nothing is guaranteed, instead relies on the temporary, the immediate, to drive their future. This is what

distinguishes her and her people from any other inhabitance. They understand the value in the performative aspect of life.

Authentic New Orleanians are not scared of what lies ahead, for they have already been there, done that, and it has undoubtedly shaped who they are; Eleven hurricanes that directly hit New Orleans, 135 years of slavery, with New Orleans being the largest domestic slave market in the country. The voodoo that illuminates the African American soul of New Orleans inspires them to be this way. The Voodoo I am talking about has nothing to do with dolls or music festivals, but instead the history of the Haitian slaves who freed themselves through the ignition of something far more powerful and spiritual than most modern New Orleanians could wrap their heads around. What I have learned is that in New Orleans, the fearlessness comes from the fact that what lies ahead could never be as horrible as what came before.

*...lift her titties,
examine his balls,
now, this damn near sounds like a hip-hop song,
but it's slavery at its peak,
it's a circus for all the freaks (Patterson. Democracy Now)*

SLAVERY:

Slavery is what shaped the South. And New Orleans was the center of the slave market. "These slaves, abandoned for their prices, were reminders to all of the inexorability of the chattel principal, of the willful incapacity of their owners to imagine a world in which enslaved people were anything other than the often fragile, sometimes resistant, but ultimately disposable vessels of slaveholders' desires" (Johnson 207). Because the owners could not imagine slavery, the enslaved Africans had to define their own autonomy and create their own performative identities. Body and soul became two separate entities. *My body is not my body* echoed as a reminder

that slavery was only of the body, but never of the soul. Their bodies were only mechanisms with which to stay alive. Their souls however, the social memory and freedom that their souls provided was what kept them alive. These spiritual bonds allowed them to remain hopeful for the future where both body and soul could unite in freedom. Johnson describes the nature of the slave community below:

As well as the bond that was articulated by the chain, slaves in the coffles shared a common culture. Many observers were struck by the fact that as slaves departed for the south they were often singing..."the Negroes, who have very little hope of seeing those again who are dearer to them than life, and who are weeping and wailing over the separation, often turn the song thus demanded into a farewell dirge." ...These songs, then, were memorials for the communities the trade had destroyed...slaves began to transform the coffle into a community. (Johnson 68-69)

The singing together was a method to escape their daily persecutions, knowing that one day, they would be free. What bellows from their mouths are triumphant melodies to bind each other together, the only way they could. There is no talk of fear. We see the same community building below, as Spike Lee is interviewed about his powerful and haunting documentary:

Tavis: There's a particular scene where at the height of despair, they've lost everything, their city is underwater, their lives have been if not destroyed, certainly challenged, for lack of a better word.

And these folk, these Black folk are in the Superdome, and they start a line where they start singing and marching inside the Dome, singing that great old gospel standard, 'This Little Light of Mine, I'm Gonna Let It Shine.' Tell me about that moment.

Lee: Well, we're a very religious people. And we turn to the good book, we turn to our gospel, we return to our spirituals, we return to our faith in the lord to lead us through many times. And we're just banking on the stuff that our ancestors did for 400 years. (Laugh) While they were enslaved. So it's really just calling on the ancestors to, like, lord, please get us through these hard times (Lee, *Travis Smiley on PBS*).

New Orleans is a city based on universal and natural performance. This is not by accident. The Chattel Principal echoes in the minds and hearts of those whose ancestors were enslaved. "Under the chattel principal, every advance into enslaved society – every reliance on another, every child, friend, or lover, every social relation – held within it the threat of its own dissolution" (Johnson 22). Just as mothers and children were ruthlessly torn away from each other during the slave trade, Katrina victims too were forced away from their loved ones without the ability to contact them. African American culture looked then and now to song, to performance, as a way to connect to a spirit which promised eventual peace. *The threat of the chattel principal should not echo in the narratives of Katrina evacuees.* Family is the most important aspect of New Orleans; Katrina cannot be the threat of its dissolution. The White Man's slave trade and the White Man's Burden during Katrina, *Don't you see they are one in the same?* Ripping African American families away from each other, with no regard, no regret. The all too familiar images of children being airlifted from rooftops, mothers, fathers screaming and crying for help with no idea what would happen to their babies. What would happen to them?

The city was cleaving along racial lines in a way he wouldn't have thought possible. It was as though integration had never happened... Richard Baker, a congressman from Baton Rouge, had introduced a bill to buy destroyed houses for their pre-storm value – a god-send – but he'd also let slip that "God" had cleaned out New Orleans Public

housing. Jimmy Reiss had told the *Wall Street Journal* that business leaders at the Dallas Meeting wanted the city to rebuild “demographically, geographically, and politically.” People heard “demographically” not as a suggestion of mixed-income housing but as a call to banish blacks... Yet the shrieking that accompanied those decisions: you’d have thought the city fathers were planning to reinstate slavery (Baum 293).

*But come, come, children, rally 'round,
and maybe together we can make a sound
that will shake the trees or rattle the ground,
make strong our knees,
we's-a freedom bound* (Patterson. *Democracy Now*)

The mistake we made was thinking power lay in the hands of the politicians, of Bush, of Nagin, of Landrieu. The mistake we made was thinking that the power of the people came from those who represented them politically. The real power in New Orleans comes from the forces that represent them spiritually. The power of the Voodoo spirit that enables a soul to take over its body and survive.

VOODOO:

Though it took place on a small island remote from the centers of power, the Haitian Revolution was the most radical revolution of a revolutionary era. It aimed squarely at destroying slavery – even if the goal of full abolition, never before achieved and barely imagined, may not have been entirely clear to all the people engaged in the struggle. A violent response to the slave-powered plantation system that dominated the New World economy, it was the beginning of the end of black slavery in the hemisphere. The fury it unleashed lingers still.

In Haiti today, voudouisants say that the spirits called up during that time were so powerful they haven't yet been able to get rid of them. (Sublette 148)

Voodoo ignited the Haitian revolution and the Haitian Revolution is what propelled New Orleans. Ned Sublette in his book *The World that made New Orleans: from Spanish Silver to Congo Square* says that "Vodou provided a method of organization and a sustaining faith for the rebellion..." (Sublette 152) The customs and traditions of Voodoo are also very important to understand. This is the opportunity that unfortunately some Louisianans' take to commercialize something that is fundamentally so powerful. This does not represent a racist attitude, however it does represent a lack of sensitivity to what should be regarded as a considerable religious movement.

During each of these invocations, the Vaudoux King collects himself; the Spirit agitates in him. Suddenly he takes the cage containing the snake, places it on the ground, and makes the Vaudoux Queen stand on it. Once the scared asylum is under her feet, having become a pythoness, she is penetrated by God, she shakes, her whole body goes into convulsions, and the oracle speaks through her mouth. (Sublette 183)

This is the moment of absolute authority compelled by secrecy. The Voodoo Queen is not speaking, God has begun to speak through her body. God is behind the force of this celebration. And thus, the dance begins.

What is very real and at the same time very remarkable in Vaudoux, is that kind of magnetic compulsion of the assembled group, to dance to the point of losing their senses. They are well protected in that respect, because Whites found spying on the mysteries of the sect... have sometimes themselves started to dance, and have consented to pay the Vaudoux Queen to put an end to this punishment. I cannot

fail to observe that never has any policeman who has sworn war on Vaudoux not felt the power that forces him to dance, and that has saved the dancers from the need to take flight (Sublette 184).

The Haitian Revolution was the most powerful and only successful slave uprising, ever. It wasn't the artillery; it wasn't a great strategy. It was the will power, the undying devotion to proclaim oneself free. The conflict in Saint-Domingue was anything but simple, involving the "big whites," "small whites," free people of color, and the slaves. "Beginning in 1788, on the eve of the French Revolution, the four social classes of Saint-Dominque fell into open rebellion against each other, one at a time, in a complex dance of death" (Sublette 149). The first two groups to revolt were the *grands blancs* and the *petit blancs*. "Whites began to use the term 'affranchi,' meaning 'ex-slave,' to refer to all free coloreds, even though a substantial number had been born to freedom" (Sublette 149). *Doesn't this sound familiar? Wasn't it the American newscasters in the days following Katrina who called African American citizens refugees? Wasn't it our government who was so quick to scapegoat "socioeconomic class" and "demographic" to separate blacks and whites? The same tactic of division-based on color exist hundreds of years later. Are you sure you didn't mean "affranchi?"*

"The French soldiers were mystified by the slaves' readiness to die" (Sublette 156). Readiness to die? Or readiness to free themselves from the most inhumane treatment institutionalized by European colonial governments. There must be something different; something embedded in the souls of those whose oppression was rooted so deep that the current still runs in the blood of their ancestors. The Haitian Revolution serves as a living historical testament to a higher power manifested in Voodoo and its ability to conquer the impossible. It singlehandedly ignited a revolution. And so the Voodoo is still ever present, just ask those who survived the hurricane.

*Few things are certain:
one, we have no food;*

*two, there are more bodies lying at the roadside
than hot plates being distributed
or first aid being administered
or recognition as a citizen.*

Fourteenth Amendment, X, refugee, check (Patterson. Democracy Now)

PRESIDENT BUSH LETTER:

President Bush,

Truthfully I never really cared for you but the atrocities that you have committed towards the working class of New Orleans are disgusting. You should be ashamed of yourself Mr. President. You called yourself the leader of the free world? Conversely, you are a leader of the most embarrassing travesty to ever occur in our lifetime. You allowed your OWN citizens to drown. You allowed the tax paying, responsible working class of New Orleans to call and scream for help, begging for food and water. You made it okay to turn your back. It is not okay. You didn't care. They weren't "important" enough. So tell me, who is important enough? What if the hurricane had wiped out the wealthy campus of Tulane and thousands of those students and wealthy uptown residents were begging for help... I bet the Red Cross would have moved a little faster. Why did fellow New Orleanians, civilians, only have each other to rely on? Where were you, where were we? This great city of New Orleans that you speak of, where do you think it comes from? Have you ever stopped to wonder why some people didn't leave? Important people, African American families who had spent their lives building families and honest livings' in New Orleans. This wasn't and continues to be a city that refuses to part with her people. This is a city that has bred its citizens. She has held them, nurtured them, challenged them. It has been the backbone to their existence. And maybe they should have heeded the warnings, and listened to what the news was saying, but don't you see? Don't you see their spirit as they dance in the parades? Can't you see

the spirit as they fought to stay alive? Why, how could YOU have left them - calling them refugees on the news? Did the water wash away their citizenship and pride as well? We go to the Middle East and spend billions on those who don't want our help, yet when our own citizens are crying, screaming, begging for our help, you turn your back in bigotry and ignorance. You should be ashamed of yourself Mr.

President. You watched your people die.

*It's kind of scary, ain't it?
to know that both the prophet and the priest practice deceit,
then come to the people and claim peace, peace,
they come to the people and they claim love, love.
But where is the peace, huh?
Where is the love? (Patterson. Democracy Now)*

I am embarrassed to be an American. But I am not even sure if I know what being an American means. Hurricane Katrina has rattled every bone in my body that told me that there is some justice, some government that warrants us as the richest nation in the country. I could drown myself in the geographical information that makes Hurricane Katrina the most devastating Hurricane our time has ever seen, but does that bring back mothers and grandmothers and great grandmothers we see floating dead in the water? It is easy to sit idly and talk about geography and weather reports and "mandatory evacuation," but that is simply gliding on a surface that people are too afraid to crack, because if you crack it that means the guilt will seep out and we will have to look at it in the face. Guilt. Where is the guilt? Why don't we stop talking about the hurricane and talk about what happened after. We watched our people die. We watched the Gulf coast of America become a third world country, and we hardly seemed to bat an eye. The American government turned its back on its citizens, and I am not afraid to tell you why. You thought you were taking out the trash? Shame on you. Shame on your inability to see that the entire Voodoo spirit that lives in New Orleans is only here because of those people who

you have tried to turn away. New Orleans is New Orleans because of those citizens you allowed to drown in their own homes. Those houses were their livelihood, years and generations of work and sweat and overcoming tragedy.

*It's either win or lose,
'cuz death don't come in vain,
not for us to remain enslaved
or our spirits to remain in cages.
It comes so we might be courageous
to fulfill our obligation to our God and all creation...*

MARY'S STORY:

She had stayed for Betsy. The water had come fast, real fast. She walked with her baby on her shoulders through the water, two years old hanging on for dear life as they walked. She lost everything. They lost everything. It was time to start again. And now it was 50 years later and Mary got the hell out. Sure the water would come, it always did. She had a nice home, she and her husband worked two jobs their whole lives to pay for that house. She had done good, she was ready to retire. Her husband had died two years before. He told her his wish was that she fix the house and retire. Rest, finally, your work is done. All your life you worked and raised your children too. It's time to breathe. But then the water came and it was time to start running again. The water always comes. So she packed up and went to Georgia with her daughter. The water flushed and poured and destroyed. They had put everything on the second floor, it would be safe there, right? The dog had stayed up there too, plenty of food and water for the two days they would be gone, let the storm pass, we'll be right back. But they weren't. The storm passed, and so did the humanity. They told her she couldn't come back. Why are you beating Mary down Governor? She had something; she had worked all her life. How dare you threaten Mary with the thought of not being able to come home.

Life in Georgia was miserable she said, it wasn't New Orleans. Why do you want to go back to that dirty city they asked? This is why. In Georgia there were no porches, no friends, no work. No people. Her people. She didn't know the city, her independence lost somewhere past the lone refrigerators and the body bags. Lost in the cracked levees and the failed government to save its people. She had never had to depend on anyone since she was fourteen years old, and she wasn't about to start now. When she entered that filthy city saturated in love and soul and memories of her life, her people, her friends, she felt free. Even among the dirt. Especially among the dirt. There was crying and praying and soon there would be healing.

What makes New Orleans, New Orleans? I asked Mary. When you walk on the street on Mother's day, everybody says "Happy Mother's Day!" your drug dealer, the alcoholic on the corner. And you say "Thank you baby!" and you feel a little better, they don't say Happy Mother's day in Georgia. When you walk into the store and see someone you knew in New Orleans, you laugh and cry together, give each other a hug. You know their pain, they know yours. It doesn't take more than a glance to understand what the other is going through. A single hug from a stranger who is your friend because they get it too. In New Orleans, everybody looks at everybody like they are somebody. Because they are. Money doesn't define you in New Orleans. Money doesn't circumstance your character. That's why she wanted to come back to New Orleans. Why should Mary give up her pride now? She saw the damage and she still felt peace. If she did it before, she could do it again. What was the alternative she asked me? To give up? Mary wasn't a beggar, Mary didn't need charity. She never should have felt that way. She has never asked for help a day in her life, she has never needed to beg for anything, who are you to make her feel like that now? Why misrepresent her and her neighbors because they live in a community that your ignorance refuses to let you understand. She was a working woman who was about to retire. She had paid for her house, her land. Most of the houses in the 9th ward were paid for. It was time to start cleaning, from the spoons to the pots and

the pans. But Mary wasn't helpless. Mary didn't ask for your sympathy baby, all she wanted was your support. From the demolition papers to the deadlines to the wrong permit then the right permit, why did it have to be so hard? Why not give all of the money at one time, so that people could start over, start again, resume their lives. Yes, their lives and their land in their neighborhoods. The places they grew up, the place that was home, the only home. Mary saved every dime she had, and piece by piece she has come back to life. It's not quite finished but she is almost there. The human spirit. The New Orleanian Human spirit. It is unlike any other in this universe. Tragedy into life. That is Mary's story.

*...stand in determination,
able to look death right in the face
and say we made it,
we made it,
we made it,
we made it (Patterson. Democracy Now)*

MARDI GRAS INDIANS:

"Oh, those plumbers and laborers and dishwashers in their thousand dollar finery, Ronald thought as he whirled and danced on up to Claiborne Avenue with half the Lower Nine falling in behind. We don't need any guns up under our clothes to be somebody on the streets of New Orleans! Men! Using money we earned by working to light up these streets — celebrating our community no matter how whipped, underpaid, or neglected! This is a day when no policeman is going to demand you turn out your pockets, no gangbanger is going to stick a gun in your face and take your wallet, no ten-year-old boy is going to be told, "Here, run up this street a ways and I'll give you five dollars." This is a day to remind the world that that man you usually look straight through — the sanitation man, the busboy,

that gardener, that truck driver, that man you never see – that that man is a king! That that man is somebody!” (Baum 125)

The Mardi Gras Indians are the primary example of the expression of soul, allowed by the living spirit of Voodoo in New Orleans. The Voodoo spirit and its revolutionary power is what allow for this type of cultural expression – a freedom for the soul – an outlet to the ancestors to proclaim *we are still here, we are still alive*. Voodoo gives the soul the ability to speak, to scream, to cry out in freedom. The Mardi Gras Indians are a form of political street theater, a community that refuses to render itself invisible. “Tootie taught us a new way to battle: with pretty. He said to the world, “I’m going to bust your ass with this suit!”” (Baum 137) This is the most important aspect of the Mardi Gras Indians as they relate to Hurricane Katrina; they refused to render themselves invisible as much as the government tried to drown them. “But pretty is about more than a masterful piece. It’s about escaping the sense that’s been bred into us that we’re ugly niggers” (Baum 137). As soon as the Indians dress in their suits, their entire state of humanity transforms into a body electrified by the spirits of the past.

The reason that New Orleans was able to come back to life after Hurricane Katrina was because of Mardi Gras Indians such as Tootie Montana. As the leader of the Yellow Pocahontas, the question of whether or not to suit up in the months following Katrina never occurred to him. *Of course he was*. The suits are more than a costume; they are a work of an entire year of self-incarceration, sewing and beading until the suit is finished. They are a masterpiece, a work of the soul, something only Voodoo spirits of the past could have ignited in tradition. “Somebody, though, had to keep these things. They were the heritage of the Lower Ninth Ward – well-nigh scared relics. And there was no end to them, because neither an Indian tribe nor a parading club could come out dressed in the previous year’s suits” (Baum 157).

What makes New Orleans, New Orleans is that the tradition of the Mardi Gras Indians began in 1889 at the Bamboula Dance in Congo Square where the first

sight of African Americans wearing feathers is recorded (Tootie's Last Suit). The failure of some Americans to understand the intricacy of this tradition that bears such meaning and purpose, the ability it has to resurrect you from your darker past was not a concern of Tootie, because *you ain't betta than me, you ain't prettier*.

What separates the Mardi Gras Indians from the rest of the brutality in the south is that Tootie was able to transform what was once an encounter based around violence into a competition based on "pretty." The act of labor that goes into making a suit, the hours of manual labor and self-incarceration that it takes to sew a perfect suit worthy of wearing on Mardi Gras is the competitive aspect between the tribes. Who can be prettier? Who can out bead, out sparkle and out dazzle the other? No violence, no gangs and certainly no looting. From an outside perspective, it may be difficult to understand the magnitude of passion that goes into organizing such a masking, but for Tootie and his Indians, this is just a way of life. The only way of life. He knew that the *culture was gon bring us back*.

June 27, 2005. Tootie Montana went to City Hall to speak about police brutality against his Indians one day as they marched. Just as his speech was about to end, Tootie Montana collapsed and died right there in City Hall. Religious views aside, this is something you just believe in. The man stood fighting for his people, fighting for the spirits and his soul and the need to render himself and his community significant in a city whose government tried to turn its back. Tootie Montana dropped dead.

A voice called, "Mah-day two-de-fiyol!" and the crowd began, in a low moan, the most important of the Mardi Gras Indian Songs... The singing grew louder: "Here comes the Biiiig Chief, the Biiiig Chief, the Big Chief of the Nation, the whole wild creation." Joyce took two steps forward, someone grabbed her arms. "He won't bow down, not on that ground," the people sang, "You know I love you, hear you call, my Indian Red." (Baum 204)

He died on the battlefield. He fought for his people in such a real way that he had to leave his body. It was time to join his soul, for good. Death at that moment is nothing other than surreal. It was real, as real as the slave market, as real as the United States of American trying to fight against the spirits of a culture that will not bow down. *We won't bow down.* If that doesn't mean something to you, then I am not sure what will. *Watch our spirits rise.*

Stop Asking Me

Stop asking me what it's like to go to school in New Orleans

Stop asking me if there is "evidence" of Katrina.

Do I see the "remnants" of a hurricane?

I wonder, what kind of "remnants" are you referring too?

When you ask me about "remnants" and "violence," aren't you really asking me if there are black looters and drug addicts and thieves on my street at night?

Maybe I should ask you what it would feel like if your house were swept away by the hand of God, then bulldozed by your government, told that your "home" was no longer.

Where would *you* spend your time at night?

Stop asking.

Start doing.

"This is my museum," he said as Inskeep came up. He reached down and pulled a strip of beadwork from the muck, walked out to the chainlink fence, and hung it to dry. It could be rinsed off and saved. Inskeep watched him curiously, the microphone held at arm's length. Ronald inhaled and leaned into it. "I'm not leaving my home." (Baum 281).

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