Chapter 12

Witness: The Racialized Gender Implications of Katrina*

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Introduction

Rechelle Carter. Brianna Carter. Linda Watson. Errolyn Warden. Barbara Richards. These five women came to Houston following Hurricane Katrina on a bus from Violet, Louisiana, a small black community located on the banks of the Mississippi River in St. Bernard Parish east of New Orleans. I met them while volunteering at the Reliant Complex, where 25,000 hurricane evacuees lived for three weeks in the fall of 2005. There I learned their story.

Several neighborhood streets in Violet are sandwiched between Judge Perez Drive and St. Bernard Highway: Guerra Drive, Lucciardi Drive, Caluda Lane. They are also surrounded by water. Behind St. Bernard Highway is a levee that holds back water from the Mississippi River basin. On the opposite side of Violet, behind Judge Perez, is a floodgate that traps the water from Lake Borgne.

On August 29, residents of Violet breathed a sigh of relief when the local news announced that Hurricane Katrina had passed. There were a few downed tree


** Many friends and colleagues read earlier drafts of this chapter and kept me stable through my own experiences, however comparatively trivial, with Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. I hope they will understand if I thank them collectively and use this space exclusively to honor and dedicate this chapter to the brave women of Violet, Louisiana, whose unbreakable spirit I could only hope to emulate.
branches and a few puddles on the lawn, but the neighborhood was intact. Violet was not destroyed by the hurricane. But it was destroyed. After the storm was over, police cruisers and fire trucks rolled down the streets with bullhorns warning residents to take cover: “We’re about to open the floodgate.”

Rechelle was cooking lunch for her family when she heard the ominous warning. Within minutes a violent surge of water burst through her house. Before she could react, the water was knee deep. It was waist high by the time she made it to the living room to save her daughter. She knew her elderly neighbors in the home across the street would never make it out alive.

Errolyn saw the warning about the floodgates on the television news ticker. The water came so fast she nearly drowned before she could reach the bedroom to warn her sister. Neither of them could swim, so they clung breathlessly to a floating dresser that had overturned in the surge. Water reached the ceiling within minutes but neither of them had the strength to punch a hole to the roof. They were lucky, though. Errolyn’s brother and her sister’s boyfriend were home. They punched the hole. For two nights the four of them waited to be rescued from the roof. They weren’t. Rescue choppers flew by so close they could see the crew smile. But the pilots did not stop. Finally, out of food, out of water, sweltering in the rotten stench, men from the neighborhood took matters into their own hands. They jumped from the roofs, waded through the sewer below, commandeered a canoe from Tim’s Marine, and went house to house picking up stranded survivors. Errolyn was one of them. She was six months pregnant.

The men ferried hundreds of stranded survivors to the dry levy behind St. Bernard Highway, across town from the opened floodgate. There they waited for days, again, no food, no water. A “big house” owned by a white family sat just beyond the levee. The owners invited the evacuees to take refuge from the scorching sun under their patio roof. But they weren’t allowed inside the house. Coast Guard choppers eventually arrived to drop off bottled water. None of the pilots spoke with the stranded black survivors. They spoke only to the white woman who owned the “big house.” They gave her the bottled water and told her to pass it on to the rest.

All five women eventually came to Houston as part of the massive evacuation from New Orleans. For weeks, they set up camp at the Houston Astrodome and Reliant Arena with tens of thousands of other evacuees. Some they knew. Some they did not. They now owned only what they wore on their back. Nothing else. Even that was torn, dirty, and reeked of stench. They slept one next to the other alongside unknown evacuees in rows of cots that stretched the length of a cement amphitheater. It was hot. It was cold. It was loud. It was dirty. It stunk. There were strangers on all sides of them, front and back, right and left. Snoring. Coughing. Pissing. Vomiting. Still, Rechelle was grateful to be alive in the Astrodome and for the angelic charity of individual volunteers who worked to make an intolerable situation—well, survivable. There were many: those who believed her when she said that no one came to rescue them, how they had to rescue themselves; those who listened when she said that Katrina did not destroy Violet, that someone opened the floodgates; those who didn’t question. She worried, though, how long she and her daughter would have to stay in the Astrodome, when they could get back to New Orleans. She worried whether her daughter was safe. Men had repeatedly entered the women’s restroom