Port-au-Prince is New Orleans: Race, Space, and the Spectacle of Suffering

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ABSTRACT

This essay interrogates the visual representation of the aftermath of two major natural disasters, Hurricane Katrina and *tranblemandeté (*the Haitian term for the 2010 earthquake). These two cities, which are linked through the history of French imperialism in the Americas, related religious practice, the legacy of slavery, and migration from post-revolution Port-au-Prince to New Orleans, drew international attention in the aftermath of their aforementioned disasters. The sheer volume of still images documenting the effects of the hurricane and earthquake – captured on inexpensive cellphones as well as professional-grade cameras (DSLRs) – lay bare the devastation wrought by *tranblemandeté* on New Orleans, Port-au-Prince, and their respective residents. Considering the crucial role that photography plays in representing the abject disaster victim in New Orleans and Port-au-Prince, this essay explores both how these photographs serve particular rhetorical ends and the way these images are produced and circulated.

I

Images of Hurricane Katrina's effect on New Orleans in August 2005 and the aftermath of the January 2010 earthquake in Port-au-Prince demonstrate the relationship between race, space, and contemporary environmental disaster. These two urban spaces, linked through the history of French imperialism in the Americas, related religious practice, the legacy of slavery, and migration from post-revolution Port-au-Prince to New Orleans, drew international attention as news of the disasters spread through various mediums, from mainstream television news reports to online social media. This essay considers the crucial role that photography plays in representing the abject disaster victim in New Orleans and Port-au-Prince, how these photographs serve particular rhetorical ends, and the way these images are produced and circulated. And while there are other relatively recent natural disasters that have been featured in contemporary media, such as the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami and the 2011 earthquake off the Pacific coast of Tōhoku, Japan, I am making a comparison between New Orleans and Port-au-Prince because of the specific ways both cities have been framed in terms of the superlative (even before these particular crises).

Jean-Claude Martineau contends that Haiti is the only country in the world with a last name: "poorest country in the Western Hemisphere" (Martineau 2005). New Orleans, too, has long been seen as a regional outlier. As Dan Baum states, the city has been "by almost any metric the worst city in America – the deepest poverty, the most murders, the worst schools, the sickest economy" (Baum 2009, xii). Hurricane Katrina was a Category 5 storm that New Orleans mayor Ray Nagin called the natural disaster "that most of us have long feared" (qtd in Havrilesky 2005). One of the costliest – in terms of both human life and property – natural disasters in U.S. history, the storm created a storm surge that breached 53 levees, leaving the majority of the city under water and federal agencies stumbling in their initial rescue attempts. Four and a half years later, on 12 January 2010, Port-au-Prince faced a similarly devastating natural catastrophe: a magnitude 7.0 earthquake with an epicenter just 16 miles outside the city. The earthquake, which revealed the instability of a large amount of residential and commercial buildings in Haiti's capital, resulted in a death toll that, according to the Columbia Journalism Review, ranges anywhere from 46,000 (from a United States Agency for International Development report) to 316,000, which was reported by the Haitian government (O'Connor 2012).

There are other reasons to compare New Orleans and Port-au-Prince. Neither the first nor the lone voice inputting post-Katrina New Orleans in conversation with post-earthquake Port-au-Prince, John Mutter, a geophysicist and professor at Columbia University's Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences, argues that the

> levee failures in New Orleans turned a natural event into a true catastrophe, but the industrial canals, built for commerce through the poorest part of the city early last century imperiled people who benefited little from the ship traffic that passed through their neighborhoods. The poor construction and maintenance of levees, and the people they put at risk, are echoed chillingly by the poorly constructed dwellings of Port-au-Prince. (Mutter 2010)

Even in his seemingly well-intentioned call to arms about the threat posed by bad building practices in both Port-au-Prince and New Orleans, Mutter reiterates stereotypes about Haiti by stating that "violent unrest is never far below the surface" and implying that this potential is one of the main differences between the two cities: "we risk a situation in Port-au-Prince that is even worse than New Orleans." Even with multiple similarities, Mutter appears to assert that the latter is more "Other" than the former. This impression of Haiti as "exceptional" – with the spread of AIDS, the practice of "voodoo," and the continuation of a violent political history – is a long-standing and deeply ingrained discourse. Or, as Raphael Dalleo succinctly describes the narrative of Haiti: "a dependent nation, unable to govern or even fend for itself, a site of lawlessness in need of more powerful neighbors to take control" (Dalleo 2013, 4). The ultimate "powerful neighbor" being the U.S., which, as Katrina showed in acute detail, often struggles to take care of itself.

Neither city has fully recovered from the traumatic events, and for many the stories of *tranblemandeté* (the Haitian term for the earthquake) and Hurricane Katrina came through a series of "professional and amateur" visual fragments freely available on the Internet: an image of unnamed people on makeshift beds and stretchers; a doctor treating lacerations on the arm of a small child; and, of course, the face-down, dead bodies on concrete, metal, and dirt. Thus, my focus on the still image over the moving image of the body has much to do with the way new media enables the rapid and relatively cheap production and circulation of the static image (via Twitter's TwitPic platform, or, for example, the attaching of digital photographs to Facebook statuses). Moreover, despite the awareness of manipulation of the image – from basic cropping

to full Photoshop alterations – one only needs to visit the comments section of any news website story adorned with images to see how the notion persists of the photograph as unalterable truth, indisputable evidence, and, most important, an objective "window into the world."

Throughout his critique of the conditions of photographic production, Simon Watney opposes the notion of the photograph as objective truth. Watney states that we, with almost instant access to a plethora of images of both events via a Google search, need "to understand the many means by which photography punctuates the look of the world into a series of discontinuous signs—photographs—which are none-the-less endlessly offered as images of totality, merely divided into moments" (Watney 2002, 143-44). Thus, this essay also focuses on this tension between the perceived "totality" of the photographic image and the visceral effect on the viewer caused by spectacular representation of the bodies (the swollen corpse, the orphaned child) in and around these two cities. More specifically, photographs can further perpetuate misconceptions about complex moments of crisis.

Furthermore, the primary content of these images is not the all-encompassing damage wrought by a storm or hurricane, but the human subject stripped bare and made abject. The visual rhetoric of these disasters is littered with bodies: living, dead, and somewhere in-between. In the case of New Orleans these bodies were very often black, while in the case of Port-au-Prince, they were nearly always black. What links these bodies is not just skin color, but also the fact that their struggle to survive is viewable for outsiders on laptops, cellphones, and television screens; moreover, these bodies occupy cities-as-liminal spaces where the division between life and death is much too close. Even from afar, the dying are the ultimate other; as Michel de Certeau asserts, the "dying are outcasts because they are deviants in an institution [in these cases the city space] organized by and for the conservation of life" (Certeau 1986, 190-1). At these moments, Port-au-Prince and New Orleans are united by their so-called inherent dysfunction: Dan Baum argues that one could start "thinking of [New Orleans] as the best-organized city in the Caribbean" (Baum 2009, xi). In public discourse, the superlative is frequently invoked when describing these cities – the most corrupt, impoverished, and disempowered – and is backed up by a visual evidence: collapsed building, poorly clothed bodies, and all the other markers of the city on life support.

Moreover, the comparison between New Orleans and Port-au-Prince, which was made on platforms as diverse as *The American Conservative* and the *San Francisco Bayview*, emerged long before the devastation of the earthquake. After Katrina, Edwidge Danticat spoke

of the link between Haiti's capital and "The Big Easy," suggesting that New Orleans looked more like Haiti than the rest of the U.S.: "It's hard for those of us who are from places like Freetown or Port-au-Prince not to wonder why the so-called developed world needs so desperately to distance itself from us," Danticat asserts, "especially at a time when an unimaginable tragedy shows exactly how much alike we are" (Danticat qtd. in Flaherty 2010). The sheer volume of images reflects the extent of the carnage and how it transformed the bodies of those caught in its wake: from the rotting corpse dangling from a gate on a washed-out New Orleans street to the bodies of Haitian children piled upon one another in the bed of a pickup truck. To discuss the spectacle of catastrophe in Port-au-Prince and New Orleans requires one to address a range of interconnected contexts, including race, geography, history, and poverty.

The comparison between Port-au-Prince and New Orleans is based primarily on two aspects: First, the physical conditions under which the two seemingly separate populations – one first-world and the other third-world – live; second, how African Americans in New Orleans were framed in similar (specifically visual) ways to Haitians in Port-au-Prince: partaking in violence and other forms of deviance and criminality, evidenced by the false reports about multiple rapes in the Superdome and numerous marauding, gun-toting gangs in Port-au-Prince. From CNN's Anderson Cooper's televised reports to online articles from *New York Times* writers "on the ground," Haitians and black New Orleanians alike were repeatedly described as being involved in looting; however, as Katy Welter outlines in "The Myth of Disaster Looting," this flies in the face of research regarding human reaction and response to natural disaster. Welter states that numerous studies show that "looting is rare – an exception to the rule of communities' pro-social responses to disaster. Despite fears to the contrary, disaster triggers altruism and cooperation while suppressing criminal behavior" (Welter 2012). In New Orleans city leaders did little to combat the stereotypes about individuals affected by disaster. New Orleans' Mayor Ray Nagin stated that there had been murders and rapes in the Superdome, a falsehood that was repeated over and over again in news coverage, helping fuel aggressive police tactics and fear in the city (Shankman 2010). In Port-au-Prince, audiences around the globe were told by The New York Times, CNN, and numerous other outlets that violence and looting in Port-au-Prince was "intensifying," while one of the leaders of the U.S. relief effort, Lt. General Ken Keen claimed "that the level of violence that we see right now is below and at pre-earthquake levels" (qtd. in Ripley 2010). While I do not mean to claim that there was no looting or other criminal activity, it is important to acknowledge two important facts: first, many people in New Orleans and Port-au-Prince were gathering goods in order to survive; second, hearsay and

media hyperbole clearly contributed to a distorted understanding of conditions "on the ground" in the wake of these crises.

II

Photography contributes directly to the aforementioned sensationalized reportage. In a couple of highly publicized photos taken in New Orleans and published by major news outlets, whites wading through the water with goods were described as "survivors" finding goods, while blacks doing the same were "looters." Guy Uriel-Charles, a Haitian-American law professor at Duke University, gave that particular image as an example when comparing representations of black residents of Port-au-Prince and New Orleans, asserting that the term looter as "a description that is void of empathy for someone who is consciously or sub-consciously viewed as 'the other.' Tragically, it fits into the stereotype [an animal; wanton and depraved] that many have about people of African descent, be they African-Americans or Haitian-Americans" (Charles 2010). Simply put, the use of the term "looter" to accompany images presupposed criminal behavior in those traversing the wrecked streets of Port-au-Prince and New Orleans.

Addressing the way that photographs can contribute to misunderstandings about humanitarian crises, I draw on Guy Debord's claim that images are "detached from every aspect of life fuse in a common stream in which the unity of this life can no longer be reestablished. Reality considered partially unfolds, in its own general unity, as a pseudo-world apart, an object of mere contemplation" (Debord 1973, thesis statement 2-4). Debord's position is that the image falsely purports to reveal "reality" when in fact it is the "concrete inversion of life"; we are lulled into contemplating the singular image as an objective record of the world rather than a fragment broken off from "life." But this does not mean that photographs hold no intrinsic value; on the contrary, these fragments are the basis for a critique of how abjection in the global south is written for Western audiences. Specifically, visual representations of these cities in crisis make us uncomfortable because they make visible the porous membrane border between "us" and "them." Post-earthquake Port-au-Prince reminds us of Katrina; post-storm New Orleans disclosed the sorts of governmental failure, massive divide between rich and poor, and seemingly insurmountable natural disaster that are "characteristic" of countries like Haiti, not the wealthiest country in the world. The realities of the third-world seeps into the first through events like Katrina, an uneasy reminder of the tenuous and finite nature of superpowers. Inherent in

this sense of unease is a voyeuristic pleasure, which directly related to viewing the fluid border between the world's wealthiest nation and its black sheep cousin.

After the earthquake Haiti had its other entrenched stereotypes – inherently violent, eternally poverty stricken, and essentially failed – reified through images circulated globally. What Wendy Hesford calls the "spectacle of suffering" (Hesford 2011, 19) was pushed to its limits in post-earthquake Haiti, and not just because of the ample opportunity and willingness to show the dead and dying, wrecked buildings, and other staple elements of those third-world disaster narratives favored by Western television broadcasts. Various platforms – personal and mainstream media-affiliated blogs, Twitter, and Facebook – put images of a so-called "broken Nation," to adopt Phillipe Girard's sensationalized term, on full display (Girard 2010). Depending on the medium, disaster in Haiti was put forth to be commented upon, shared, liked, reposted, and retweeted. This massive exposure of Haitian bodies (crushed by concrete, scrambling for food and water, shot by police, covered by dust and dirt, clambering across ravines filled with trash and human waste) and Western audiences' voracious (if short-lived) desire to "see more," calls to mind Frantz Fanon's reflection on the white gaze upon the black body. This gaze, Fanon asserts, "had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories . . . [and] all the time they were clamoring for more" (Fanon 1991, 91). Both beguiling and wretched, these images of natural disaster in Haiti elicited responses of pity, disgust, and voyeuristic pleasure: for Western audiences, Haiti was framed as the archetypal abject nation. Fanon's naming of a thousand "stories" could be updated for the potential of today's Internet age, where a dizzyingly number of "details, anecdotes, and stories" is the norm: social media allows stories to abound, expand, and circulate without end.

The fixing of the abject comes about through a myriad of forces: technology, economics, and access. Wendy Hesford addresses the connection between visual rhetoric and "how human rights principles are culturally translated into a vernacular that imagines audiences, particularly Western audiences, as moral subjects of sight" (Hesford 2011, 8). While Hesford's international examples range from an Amnesty International USA (AIUSA) poster featuring a photograph of a young Afghan refugee to *New York Times* columnist Nicholas D. Kristof's purchase of two young women from brothels in Cambodia, her description of the Western audiences as the "moral subjects of sight" calls to mind the post-disaster situations in New Orleans and Port-au-Prince. Various governmental and non-governmental organizations asked for funds through television and online charity campaigns in the days, weeks, and months following these events, and the "moral subjects" sought for these donations were the same audience who had born

witness to the Haitians and New Orleanians looters. The "moral subjects" of these campaigns are asked to save Haiti and New Orleans from the innately deviant inhabitants of these failing cities. However, there is a fundamental difference between these two cities, particularly in regards to how non-residents view and experience these cities. While the earthquake in Haiti became the next chapter in the failed state narrative so commonly affixed to the country, Hurricane Katrina was written as revealing the divide between rich and poor that exists throughout the country. The hurricane wrought serious damage on large areas of the American southeast, but New Orleans became the space most readily associated with Katrina. According to a BBC report, the well-documented failure of the levee system left 80 percent of the city flooded (Murphy 2005). In the aftermath of the hurricane, race, poverty, and space (particularly the low-lying, black neighborhoods that were devastated) became intertwined with the larger structural issues (federal response, urban planning).

Furthermore, Katrina as revelator of entrenched Southern poverty was a common – if lacking in context – trope in media reportage. For those who did ground their claims about the South – and, specifically, New Orleans's exceptional poverty – in facts and figures, the numbers provided some context about the lives of those black bodies (living and dead) photographed outside (and, in the days during and immediately after the storm, atop) flooded homes. In *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster* Michael Eric Dyson mines the relationship between blackness, southern poverty, and Katrina: "The hardest-hit regions in the Gulf States had already been drowning in extreme poverty: Mississippi is the poorest state in the nation, with Louisiana just behind it . . . Before the storm, New Orleans, with a 67.9 percent black population, had more than 103,000 poor people [earning less than $10,000 a year]" (Dyson 2007, 6-7).

In the aftermath of the hurricane, black poverty was made visible by the presence of black bodies in spaces that should have been evacuated. Robert Stolarik, a New York City-based photographer, produced a number of widely circulated images of a soaked and broken New Orleans, including a bird's eye view shot of a young black man wading through a wide flooded street flanked on both sides by cemeteries. Behind him, there is the kind of row housing associated with the "projects" of many urban areas in the south. The young man, head down and shorts hiked up in order to avoid contact with the murky water, can be read as an allegorical figure evoking the isolation and extreme conditions experienced by many New Orleanians in predominantly black neighborhoods. The effect of this is heightened by the position of the photographer who is high above his human subject, free of the carnage below.

But while images like the one described above were contained in books, featured on news websites (both broadcast television and online), and included in newspaper and magazine reportage in August 2005 and the months after, images of the black body caught in the Haiti earthquake circulated in a different, much more heavily digital manner. One significant difference between the visual representation of the earthquake and the hurricane is the growth of our online worlds. Although Facebook and other social media websites (including Flickr and other assorted online photo albums) existed in 2005, these platforms were not as pervasive or sophisticated as they are today. In a 2007 study titled "Analysis of Topological Characteristics of Huge Online Social Networking Services," the authors claim that social networking sites "attract nearly half of all web users" (de Zúñiga et al 2012, 319). Over the last few years, with the growth of Facebook from a platform consisting of mostly American college student accounts to a rapidly increasing amount of new users from around the world, social networking sites have become an increasingly pervasive and all-encompassing part of the Internet (Garland 2013, 63). As of 2011, according to Alexa, a company that tracks Internet traffic, Facebook is second only to Google in regards to total users in both the United States and the wider world (Jung et al.). Twitter, which like Facebook has grown into a massive, international social media network, was founded nine months after Katrina, but five years later it served as an extremely effective means of disseminating images of the disaster in Haiti. According to a Nielsen Company report (2010), immediately after the earthquake "much of what people are learning" about the quake (and, by extension, Haiti) was coming by way of social media. The report states that preliminary "analysis of data shows that Twitter posts ("micro-blogs") are the leading source of discussion about the quake, followed by online video, blogs and other online boards/forums."

Additionally, hours after the earthquake struck, mashable.com, a Scottish/American news website, published a story titled, "Haiti Earthquake: Twitter Pictures Sweep Across the Web [PHOTOS]" with the author, Ben Parr, writing that there are "thousands of Facebook and Twitter updates on the disaster appearing every minute. The web has been moved by the plight of the Haitian people. Social media has quickly become the first place where millions react to large-scale catastrophes" (Parr 2010). The words, "[the] web has been moved," suggests empathy and concern for earthquake images by those viewing the photographs, and the photographs are suitably evocative for this audience. A "first view" of post-earthquake Haiti that Parr refers to is a medium shot of the collapsed façade of what appears to be a storefront; in the right hand corner is the head and shoulders of a figure, his or her features blurred by movement. The last in the set of six images is a portrait of an older woman, barefoot and sitting

atop a concrete slab, a street covered with debris from the quake. Her dress is open, and her breast is partially exposed. This photograph, one imagines, is an attempt to put a "human face" on the earthquake, beyond the broken glass and dust and mangled beams. The impassivity of the subject's face could be read as embodying a sense of shock and resistance, a refusal to perform for the photographer. This, too, connects New Orleans to Port-au-Prince; residents are aware and resistant to their story being told from the outside, and they are acutely aware of the outsider's gaze. In a recent interview, long-time Lower 9th Ward resident Iantha Parker, in reference to the tour buses that bring in tourists to photograph the reconstructed neighborhood, was forthright about being constantly looked upon: "Leave us alone, already" (Parker qtd. in Quinlan 2013).

III

Julia Kristeva's use of the terms "the abject" and "abjection" certainly informs my reading of how Haiti and New Orleans were both written (and read) in the aftermath of these disasters: the veritable "clamoring for more" details that elicit both pity and antipathy—physical destruction, chaos, and, last but certainly not least, damaged black bodies (whether dead, injured, or in other ways traumatized). Kristeva defines abjection as the potential breakdown of the perceived distinction between self (subject) and object (other), and how this dissolution elicits feelings of disgust and repulsion (Kristeva 1982). What causes this reaction? Kristeva uses the corpse as the quintessential abject object – a stark reminder of one's own mortality – but vomit, open wounds, and human waste also elicit similar feelings of abjection. That which disgusts is a trope of not only post- but also pre-earthquake Haiti poverty narratives, and also part of the mainstream media's treatment of poor New Orleanians. For example, the media repeatedly put forth images like the "blanketed body of a dead victim who remained for days in a wheel chair," and a Pulitzer Prize-winning newspaper claimed (falsely) that somewhere between 30 and 40 bodies had been shoved into a refrigeration unit, including a 7-year-old girl who had had her throat sliced open (Campbell and Leduff 2012, 212). These scenarios demonstrated the extent to which some expected deviant behavior from the New Orleanian other.

When in contact with the repulsive other, the seemingly sterile self is struck by a sense of attraction: the corpse is the inevitable destination of our corporal state; reviled vomit and feces also come from our own bodies. My use of Kristeva's abjection is informed by two elements: first, how she identifies the abject/abjection as that which is "radically excluded," and,

as she describes, "draws me toward the place where meaning collapses." Viewing particular "other" objects, whether on the micro (a puddle of urine in the hallway) or macro-level (dusty bodies trapped under mangled sheet metal on a city street), disgust and incomprehensibility intermingle, with clear meaning obfuscated by visceral shock and horror. With post-Katrina New Orleans, the images of "hundreds of people – most of them black – stranded and waiting for help" (Campbell and Leduff 2012, 212) evoked a sense of familiarity (Americans like us) and distance (they are American refugees). Moreover, New Orleans is Port-au-Prince not only because it elicits similar feelings of abjection, but also because Hurricane Katrina serves as a reminder of how the distinction between "us" and "them" becomes blurry under certain conditions: how natural disasters can fully reveal the dysfunctional relations between the state and its citizens.

New Orleans is also written in terms of both the superlative and in desperate need of outside intervention: the international research group, Institute for Economics and Peace, rated Louisiana as the most dangerous state in the union and New Orleans as one of the most dangerous cities in the United States. Fear seems to underscore the discourse of both cities, whether in direct reference to the residents' criminal proclivities or as part of these cities' so-called "character." Shortly after the earthquake, TIME Books published *Haiti: Tragedy & Hope.* TIME's managing editor, Richard Stengel's introduction to the book, "To Respond and Report," says much about the sharp edges of the white gaze:

> There is a sense of satisfaction in covering a great story, of course, especially if in doing so you can help those who have been hurt, but in the case of Haiti, that did not seem quite enough. That is in part why we have put together this beautiful and moving book, made up of striking images and insightful words. We are donating to Haitian relief $1 for each softback and $2 for each trade hardback. (Stengel 2010, 6)

The earthquake was a crisis that compelled Western journalists to go to Haiti and, according to Stengel, undertake "writing and reporting [that makes] the case for fixing what is broken, and in doing so, for helping thousands, millions" (6). Earlier in his piece Stengel attempts to describe the conflict that the Western journalist in Haiti faces – whether to continue reporting or to assist in whatever small way they could – by stating that "our reporters and photographers were confronted by Haitian men and women who said, Put down your cameras. Put down your pens. Do something. Help us." Implicit in Stengel's claim is the idea that the mass distribution of

photographs taken and words written by outsiders and disseminated to Western audiences directly and positively affect those "victims" of this particular natural disaster.

But that is not the most problematic element of Stengel's "To Report and Respond." In the longer quote cited above, Stengel describes the book as containing photographs that are "beautiful," "moving," "striking," and "insightful." Stengel's essay is accompanied with full-page images of the following "beautiful," moving," "striking," and "insightful" images: a head and shoulders shot of a Haitian boy, perhaps five-years-old, with a large bandage covering a laceration; a double-page spread of a near-dead man being extracted from a collapsed building, his broken body atop some makeshift stretcher (a door?) by a number of men, while at the edge of the frame a group of onlookers, old and young, watch from a few feet away; in another double-page photographic image, a man and woman (the man has a young child clinging to his back) run past a makeshift funeral pyre, one of the bodies clearly visible at the base of an inferno reaching twenty feet off the street; the following two pages show a closer shot of a collapsed room where, in the bottom left hand corner of the image, a man reaches into the rubble over a dead and dust-covered corpse, the live man's rescue attempt watched by two others wearing that omnipresent accompaniment of rescue crews, the surgical mask; the following is a medium close-up of a woman laying prone on the ground, her arms stretched out towards large broken concrete bits, while, as the accompanying caption tells us, she cries "in desperation for family members presumed dead under the rubble of a home in Port-au-Prince. Tens of thousands of the people who died will never be identified" (Stengel 2010, 15). And, it is worth noting: these images are not very different from the rest of the images in the book, which document many different stages of human misery.

IV

Another *TIME* publication, *Hurricane Katrina: The Storm That Changed America* (2005), which, like *Haiti: Tragedy and Hope,* was published in the months following the storm landing in Louisiana, offers another meditation on the shocking image and its audience. The blurb on the inside promises the reader that within "the editors of TIME tell the full story of Hurricane Katrina through remarkable pictures, moving words and incisive analysis" (Marsalis 2005). Unlike TIME's take on the earthquake in Haiti, the images are not described as "beautiful." Rather, they are described as "remarkable," assigning a term one might apply to a shooting star or medical advancement to photographs of bloated corpse floating facedown in the flooded street beneath

an overpass, another swollen body laying spread-eagle in the wake of a passing rescue boat, and another laid out on a street corner, shrouded by an American flag. John Chiasson, a featured *TIME* photojournalist who traveled to post-Katrina New Orleans to shoot the aftermath, appears to be enamored with the experience: "Every time I turned a corner, I would see an amazing spectacle, but I hadn't been assigned to shoot those scenes," Chiasson said. In a quotation in large font included in the photo essay, which includes a portrait of an older black woman standing in front of her buckled home, Chiasson also stated that "[he] could have shot until my camera wore out" (Chiasson 2005, 102). Surrounded by seemingly endless abjection, photographers like Chiasson had to pick and choose whom and what they would contribute to the narrative of New Orleans as the failed American city. While mainstream media reports focused on the limits of the state as evidenced by the lack of resources and coordination in the disaster response, both the hurricane and the earthquake demonstrated the way the state shapes the (abject) subject.

There is perhaps no clearer physical reminder of Haiti's close relationship to the U.S. than the National Palace in Port-au-Prince, which I visited two years after the earthquake. Both a symbol of national pride and reminder of American imperial ambitions in the country, the National Palace was one of the first stops for foreign visitors to Port-au-Prince (often at the urging of Haitians). Built on the site of earlier iterations of the seat of Haitian governance, the National Palace, which is twice the size of the White House, shared the French Renaissance architectural style (Châteauesque, Beaux-Arts) apparent throughout Washington D.C. The trace of France in the buildings of both the Haitian and American capitals is not the only link between the National Palace and its American counterpart. Construction was completed during the first few years of the U.S.'s nineteen-year (1915-1934) occupation of Haiti, with American naval engineers overseeing and U.S. marines contributing to the project. It is not surprising, then, that images of the semi-destroyed National Palace were such a central component of the visual lexicon following the 12 January 2010 earthquake. The crumpled cupola – the dome-like structure and centerpiece of the palace's façade – had slid forward from the roof during the quake or one of the numerous aftershocks, personifying the palace as one of the hundreds of thousands of Haitians staggering under the weight of this latest tragedy. Notably, the collapsed National Palace evokes another evacuated site of humans once displaced by disaster: the Superdome in Louisiana, home to the beloved New Orleans Saints, and an eerie site of the limits and weaknesses of the United States of America. Today, the Superdome has the sponsorship of one of the world's most famous luxury brands – Mercedes Benz – and is used

for games played by teams in one of the world's richest professional sports leagues, the National Football League. But it is also a space once occupied by one of the most marginalized populations in the United States: the poorest people dispossessed by Hurricane Katrina. Like the National Palace in Port-au-Prince, the Superdome became the backdrop for the spectacle of a city – and its poorest residents – in free fall.

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