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Hannah Chalew, *Odin St. Takeover*, 2010. Courtesy of the artist

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Introduction: The Cultural Visualization of Hurricane Katrina

Nicola Mann and Victoria Pass

It has been nearly six years since Hurricane Katrina ripped through the Gulf of Mexico cutting a swathe of devastation and shock through the psyche of the American people. Exacerbated by the recent BP oil spill in the region, the storm and its aftermath remains an open wound for local residents and others affected by the disaster, leaving many in the Gulf Coast facing an uncertain future. Between August 23rd and September 1st, 2005, at least 1,836 people lost their lives in the hurricane and subsequent floods. Mass-scale human suffering and overwhelming property damage and losses ensued in the wake of government uncertainty and inept relief efforts. The most severely affected area, New Orleans, which flooded as the levee system buckled to the might of the Category 4 hurricane, continues to reel from the storm and its deeply political consequences today. While tourist attractions do their best to convince us of the city's recovery, high-water marks scar the exteriors of abandoned buildings, reminding visitors and residents alike of the uncomfortable truths about Hurricane Katrina and the many displaced people who continue to wait to reclaim their homes. This issue of *Invisible Culture* seeks to explore how our hypervisual world visualized Hurricane Katrina, from 24-hour news networks' live coverage to home videos made into documentaries, from personal photos posted on blogs to the work of photojournalists on the front pages of newspapers all over the world, and from individual memorials to state-sponsored ones.

In order to chart the evolution of the cultural visualization of Hurricane Katrina, it is worth returning to the complicated aftermath of the storm, when the national and international media focused on the social trauma left by the disaster. New Orleans, in particular, captured the media and public's attention not only because of its high level of devastation but also as a result of its history of racial and cultural diversity. This city had long been a tourist mecca, famous for jazz, voodoo, and loose liquor laws. In the wake of the storm, the world looked on in horror at the sight of hundreds of thousands of

mostly poor, African-American people crammed into the New Orleans Superdome and the city's Ernest M. Morial Convention Center, stranded on rooftops, or isolated on patches of high dry land without food, water, or shelter. Grotesque images of bloated corpses floating in the putrid waters that flooded through the streets of New Orleans came to dominate hypervisible post-hurricane news coverage. The inability of federal, state, and local authorities to respond rapidly and effectively to Hurricane Katrina quickly became a major scandal in the United States and sent shockwaves through the international community.

Nevertheless, sympathetic news coverage of the bodies of the dead and the walking wounded in New Orleans soon gave way to reporting that characterized disaster victims as opportunistic looters and vicious criminals and that presented the disaster-stricken city through the lens of civil unrest and lawlessness. On the pages of national newspapers, headlines announced "The Looting Instinct"¹ and "Thugs' Reign of Terror,"² and deigned those stealing for survival to be senseless thieves, "the lowest form of human being haunting the earth."³ Lurid, salacious reports of murder, rape, and acts of random violence framed New Orleans in a turmoil of war-like anarchy, and characterized those trapped in the city as deadly threats to emergency responders.

These media frames unraveled challenging race- and class-based stereotypes and narratives in the days that followed the levee breaches. As Michael Eric Dyson states in his book, *Come Hell or High Water* (2006), the media—whether consciously or not—played a pivotal role "in framing blacks as outlaws and savages."⁴ Dyson goes on to contend that "the media also framed the black poor when it helped to spread rumors about violent and animalistic behaviors in the shelters to which they fled."⁵ The racial "frames" to which Dyson refers ensured that the early outburst of public sympathy for those affected by the disaster would soon give way to a more critical viewpoint. Race-based bias, which previously simmered below the surface of many Americans' views of low-income black people, now bubbled to the surface, shattering the U.S. fiction of a color-blind

¹ *The Boston Globe* (September 4, 2005), E11.

² *The New York Daily News* (September 4, 2005), 7.

³ Shankar Vedantam and Allison Klein, "You wonder why it didn't kill a million; officials upbeat in view of what might have been as survivors recount horror of what is," *The Washington Post*, (September 3, 2005), Sec A.

⁴ Michael Eric Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2006), 166, 170.

⁵ Dyson, 170.

society. An outpouring of highly simplified and racist stereotypes so often recycled in the name of the vulnerable African-American poor—welfare dependency, crime, and familial dysfunction to name but a few—subsequently dominated news coverage of Hurricane Katrina.

These racist representations provided justification for the following heavy-handed action taken by the military and police in response to the disaster. On September 1st, 2005, Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco issued a controversial order authorizing soldiers to shoot to kill looters in an effort to restore calm. On September 2nd, the New Orleans-based *Times-Picayune* reported: “Governor Kathleen Blanco called the looters ‘hoodlums’ and issued a warning to lawbreakers: Hundreds of National Guard troops hardened on the battlefield of Iraq have landed in New Orleans. ‘They have M-16s, and they’re locked and loaded,’ she said.”⁶ Government officials increasingly reacted to the catastrophe—a tragedy that was in large measure of their own making—as if New Orleans faced, not an appalling disaster, but an armed insurgency. An image of a tank rolling through the streets near the Convention Center and photographs of heavily armed National Guardsmen became front-page newspaper stories all over the world on September 2nd. This image helped to solidify the impression the public had of the Guard’s role in the disaster—while the military assisted by bringing food, supplies, and support, they *also* supplied guns to control the anarchy in the city. At the same time, victims of the storm, such as Reverend Issac Clark, told the Associated Press, “We are out here like pure animals. We don’t have help.”⁷ Journalists and public figures alike began referring to the survivors of the storm as refugees, as though the storm had swept away not only their homes, but also their citizenship.

Later inquiries, however, reveal that the stories about the city’s supposed “anarchy” were greatly overstated.⁸ *Times-Picayune* journalist Brian Thevenot was one of the reporters who helped to dispel the myths that spread about the violence in the Superdome and Convention Center: “What I later confirmed is that occasional

⁶ Allen Breed, “National Guardsmen pour into New Orleans,” *Times-Picayune* (September 2, 2005). http://www.nola.com/newslogs/breakingtp/index.ssf?/mtlogs/nola_Times-Picayune/archives/2005_09.html.

⁷ “Anarchy disrupts US storm relief,” *BBC News* (September 1, 2005). <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4205074.stm>.

⁸ Sarah Rosenblatt and James Rainey, “Rita’s Aftermath; Katrina Takes a Toll on Truth, News Accuracy.” *Los Angeles Times*, (September 27, 2005), A16.

gunfire, stampedes and terror did indeed plague the Convention Center. But only one death could be called a suspected homicide...Widespread reports of rapes could not be confirmed.”⁹ Thevenot believed that these kinds of stories, “may have started with some basis in fact [but] got exaggerated and distorted as they were passed orally—often the only mode of communication—through extraordinarily frustrated and stressed multitudes of people, including refugees, cops, soldiers, public officials and, ultimately, the press.”¹⁰ Thevenot misses the point, however, that by mislabeling those displaced by the hurricane as refugees, stories of terror and violence are all the more believable. Slavoj Žižek argued that, “what motivated these stories were not facts, but racist prejudices, the satisfaction felt by those who would be able to say: “You see, Blacks really are like that, violent barbarians under a thin layer of civilization!”¹¹ Confronted with images of life in the Superdome, it was hard to believe that such squalor was possible in a civilized American city. It was not the orderly relief work the country was used to seeing, with lines of cots and people in uniform. It was easier to displace these images by calling those in them refugees and imagining New Orleans to be some far off country without law and order, than to acknowledge that this tragedy could happen in the United States.

Two photographs that appeared on Yahoo news and other Internet news outlets on September 2nd, 2005 solidified the racial fault lines underlying the disaster, and prompted a debate about race and the mainstream news media in its aftermath. One photo, taken by Dave Martin, an Associated Press Photographer in New Orleans, depicted a young African-American man wading through chest-deep water. Clutching a case of Pepsi soda and pulling a floating bag behind him, Martin describes him as “looting a grocery store.” Another photograph, taken by Chris Graythen for Getty Images and distributed by Agence France-Presse, shows a white couple up to their chests in the same dirty water. Next to a photograph of a woman holding some bags of food, Graythen characterizes her actions as “finding bread and soda from a local grocery store.”

⁹ Brian Thevenot, “Myth-Making in New Orleans,” *American Journalism Review* (December 2005/January 2006), 36.

¹⁰ Thevenot, 37.

¹¹ Slavoj Žižek, “Katrina: Rumors, Lies, and Racist Fantasies,” *In These Times* (October 31, 2005).



Figure 1. Juxtaposition of Dave Martin's and Chris Graythen's photos

Soon after these photos appeared on Yahoo, a user of the photo-sharing website Flickr connected the images and captions on a single page, which attracted links from numerous blogs. Quite unexpectedly, this juxtaposition became one of the first powerful symbols of the different treatment of New Orleans' African-American and white residents by the media—a phenomenon Dyson describes as “the color of disaster”—and, in a broader sense, a metaphor for the state of race relations in America.¹² These photographs came to encapsulate the power disparities (re)produced by ideologically-based news imagery, which repeatedly sanctions some groups' actions while negating and dehumanizing others. The images' presence on blogs highlighted the issue of race as the pivotal concept for thinking about Hurricane Katrina in the realm of public debate. People were no longer willing to accept the producer/consumer binary implicit in traditional mass media journalism. Of Yahoo's

¹² Dyson, 166, 170.

looting photographs, the blog *Daily Kos* commented, “It’s not looting if you’re white,” while *Boston Globe* correspondent Christina Pazzanese posted the following inquiry on media commentator Jim Romanesko’s blog: “I am curious how one photographer knew the food was looted by one and not the other?”¹³ Many journalists and celebrities began to ask the same question.

Musician Kanye West addressed the issue raised by the two photographs during a live fundraiser broadcast of “A Concert for Hurricane Relief” on NBC for the victims of Hurricane Katrina. A visibly nervous West, ignoring his scripted dialogue with Mike Meyers, used his few moments on live television to lambaste President Bush and criticize the press. “I hate the way they portray us in the media,” he said. “You see a black family, it says they’re looting. You see a white family, it says they’re looking for food.” He went on to proclaim, “George Bush doesn’t care about black people.” Angered by the portrayal of African-Americans on television and the way that the National Guard enforced martial law, West seemed ashamed of his own reaction to the disaster: “I’ve even been shopping before even giving a donation.” NBC cut West’s unscripted comments from the rebroadcast of the show for the West Coast, but they nevertheless had made a huge impact in the news.

It was not only Kanye West who “removed the filter” from his public statements in the days after the hurricane made landfall. Occurring just before the fourth anniversary of the September 11th attacks, Katrina garnered a similarly emotional response from other public figures. Newsroom anchors were brought to tears as they reported on the damage the city had incurred. Anderson Cooper, in particular, came to represent a different kind of response from reporters to the disaster. In the aftermath of the storm, reporting from Louisiana, Cooper gave voice to the frustration of survivors of the Hurricane and the resulting flood—survivors who were still fighting to stay alive in the wake of the storm. Cooper could not manage to adopt the familiar fatherly guise of the traditional American reporter, reassuring his audience with an even tone and cadence. Instead he displayed his sadness, disbelief, and rage live on air.

Cooper was not the only reporter who expressed his despair while covering the Hurricane. A video compilation of news coverage of the Hurricane created for the exhibition *Covering Katrina* at Washington, D.C.’s Newseum shows a number of reporters breaking

¹³ Aaron Kinney, “Looting” or “Finding”?, *Salon*, http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2005/09/01/photo_controversy (September 1, 2005).

down while covering the storm. Cooper, though, seemed to tap into a particular mix of anger and sadness that connected him to his audience. In a profile in *New York* magazine during the days following the Hurricane, Jonathan Van Meter writes that Katrina was the first disaster “we’ve had to endure without the three sonorous authority figures—Tom [Brokaw], Dan [Rather], and Peter [Jennings]—who explained unfathomable events on the nightly news for a quarter century.” Van Meter explains that through his impassioned reporting, Cooper “became a proxy, both for the victims of Katrina and for his viewers, building a bridge between the two. He reacted the way any of us might have—raging against government officials when help didn’t come fast enough, and weeping when it all got to be too much...He connected to those in the hurricane’s path, and to the people watching at home. He removed the filter.”¹⁴

The “filter” and the removal of the “filter”—the operational space between seer and seen—serves as a central guiding philosophy of this issue of *Invisible Culture*. We begin with Brian Greening’s consideration of the Superdome in “Spectacular Disaster: The Louisiana Superdome and Subsumed Blackness in Post-Katrina New Orleans.” Greening explores the home ground of the New Orleans Saints as a site of intense visual contestation, marked by the many problematic and falsifiable world news narratives of “roving murderous hordes, pedophiles raping infants, and makeshift morgues storing bodies by the hundreds.” Employing images and narratives garnered from *inside* the Superdome, as opposed to the media frenzy *outside*, Greening unearths an alternate vision to this constructed mythology, which serves to refute pejorative representations of blackness. In doing so, Greening problematizes the symbolic resonance of the Superdome’s spectacular 2006 reopening as a sign of New Orleans’ “rebirth.” Charles Gentry presents an unconventional take on another temporary communal shelter for the victims of the disaster via an interview with Ashley Sabin and David Redmon, makers of the documentary *Kamp Katrina*. Unlike many of the much-publicized documentaries and movies released in the wake of the disaster, which are comprised of a compilation or re-framings of other people’s footage, Sabin and Redmon compose *Kamp Katrina* solely out of original material gathered during their time in the tiny tent village in New Orleans’ Upper Ninth Ward. “The *Kamp Katrina* Project: A Conversation with the Filmmakers” depicts a vision of life

¹⁴ Jonathan Van Meter, “Unanchored,” *New York* (September 11, 2005)
<http://nymag.com/nymetro/news/features/14301/>

on the ground of post-Katrina New Orleans from the vantage point of the survivors, offering personal insights into the emotional turmoil, dedication, and hope of their eclectic fellow campers as well as their determination to be re-born after massive death, destruction, and displacement.

Maria Brodine provides insight into another kind of counter-narrative surrounding the events of the Hurricane—one that took place in the virtual space of blogs. Her article examines the ways the New Orleans bloggers reacted to media coverage of the storm, using their online space to dispute the narratives being created on television, radio, and in newspapers. She also chronicles the relationships formed between the bloggers, both online and through face-to-face meetings at conferences in the years after the storm.

William Taylor's article offers an examination of the numerous photographic images of the damage caused by Katrina. His work considers art photographs taken by Robert Polidori alongside photographs taken for insurance purposes. Placing these recent archives of photographs in the context of historical representations of disaster stretching back several centuries in the Jan T. Kozak Collection at the University of California at Berkeley, Taylor questions the photographer's role as an eyewitness and the role of photographs as evidence. The materialization of Katrina's legacy forms the basis of Lindsay Tuggle's analysis in "Flooding, Enclosure, and Invitation: Strategies of Incorporative Mourning in the Memorialization of New Orleans." Through a formal examination of the labyrinthine design of the 2008 Katrina Memorial, which appropriates the form of the hurricane as its architectural structure, Tuggle poses complex questions about the paradoxes of mourning trauma, the ethics of national mourning strategies, and the haunting produced by the bad conscience of a fraught collective psyche. As Tuggle argues, the Katrina Memorial functions not as an attempt to remember those lost in the disaster or even as an effort to alleviate the suffering of survivors but as an exercise in architectural and cultural whitewashing. The Katrina Memorial erases the buried history of poverty in New Orleans in order to concertize and memorialize a so-called natural disaster for the sake of disaster tourists.

Through the insights provided and the questions posed by Greening, Brodine, Taylor, and Tuggle, this issue of *Invisible Culture* contributes a critical counter-vision to dominant mass-media interpretations of the devastation surrounding the events of August and September 2005. The work of these scholars reveals the

continued efficacy of the methods and tools of Visual and Cultural Studies for thinking about the politics of representation and the crucial role it has to play in understanding and appreciating world events. Our analysis of the visualization of Hurricane Katrina is particularly apt in the wake of the current revolutions in the Middle East. Regardless of where and when they occur, we now experience historical events interactively through the user participation enabled by new media, reorienting the producer/consumer binary of traditional media, and creating an enlightened arena for community formation and creative interaction.

Spectacular Disaster: The Louisiana Superdome and Subsumed Blackness in Post-Katrina New Orleans

Brian Greening

Often enough, as in the contemporary United States, the association of place with memory, loss, and nostalgia plays directly into the hands of reactionary popular movements.¹

— Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson

The pleasures of New Orleans come from a crucible of undeniable pain.²

— George Lipsitz

On September 25th, 2006, the New Orleans Saints returned to the Louisiana Superdome following a vagabond season that had them playing “home” games in San Antonio and New York. An understandably bewildered and preoccupied franchise following the onslaught of Hurricane Katrina, the Saints finished the 2005 season dismally with three wins and thirteen losses. But on the emotional homecoming night, spurred on by a boisterous crowd, the former drifting franchise started the game strong by blocking a punt on the game’s fifth play. Special teams player Steve Gleason carried the ball into the end zone for a quick touchdown. Head coach Sean Payton pumped his fist. Quarterback Drew Brees grasped his helmet by the facemask and thrust it in the air. Fans pounded stands draped in Saints banners with their hands and feet to express their approval. Following a 23-3 win, the Saints presented the game ball to the city.

¹ Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, “Beyond ‘Culture’: Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference,” *Culture, Power, Space: Explorations in Critical Anthropology* (Bakerville: Duke University Press, 1997), 41.

² George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 240.



Figure 1. Louisiana Superdome reopening ceremony, New Orleans, Louisiana, September 25th, 2006. © Alex Brandon, AP.

Monday Night Football announcer Tony Kornheiser proclaimed that the Saints' success, along with the rebirth of the Superdome, signaled the reemergence of the city of New Orleans. Careful observers could not help but wonder, though, whether Kornheiser was glossing over the complex memory the Superdome contained. Throughout its thirty-year existence, the Superdome has housed spectacles in one form or another. From the four Final Four basketball tournaments to the two Bowl Championship Series National Championship football games to the record six Super Bowls that took place there, the Superdome has largely contained the hypermasculine spectacle of male sporting events. But for a week's span—from late August, 2005, until the last evacuees were sent by bus to Houston on September 3rd—the Katrina-battered and breached Superdome housed New Orleans', indeed America's, most vulnerable citizens.

Following Katrina's landfall in New Orleans, with the Superdome serving as a media-saturated microcosm of the city that spawned it, tuned-in world citizens viewed stories about roving

murderous hordes, pedophiles raping infants, and makeshift morgues storing bodies by the hundreds in the Superdome's sublevels. By using these shocking (and often aggrandized or falsified) tales of intrigue as an in-road for their abject positioning of the mostly black urban poor, journalists and willing subscribers allowed for blackness to be either repositioned or reified as a space where, without supervision, lawlessness prevailed. In this period of strain, many journalists reverted to archaic color-based stereotypes.³ Black people looted while white people salvaged; blacks were obdurate in their decision to remain in the city while whites were largely victims taken by surprise; blackness was temperamental and violent while whiteness was composed and unwavering. But the images from inside and just outside the Superdome often resisted these assertions, suggesting instead that government negligence and media malpractice produced negative portrayals of black citizens rather than the other way around.

In an effort to support my assertions above, I will use W. J. Thomas Mitchell's image-rendering model "sounding the idols." Adopted from Friedrich Nietzsche's notion of "sounding out idols," Mitchell broadens Nietzsche's method of striking at eternal, mystifying idols to entail "a delicate critical practice that [strikes] images with just enough force to make them resonate, but not so much as to smash them."⁴ Mitchell's declaration that images are "doubly conscious" and paradoxical—that they are both alive and dead, powerful and weak, meaningful and meaningless—is in keeping with the images that issued forth from the Superdome shortly after Katrina hit.⁵ In this study, I adopt Mitchell's concept of sounding the idols to show how images from within the Superdome speak against widespread news stories that portrayed New Orleans' "so poor and so black" citizens as agents of their own displacement rather than victims of a natural (or national) disaster.⁶ I seek to

³ Michael Eric Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster* (Cambridge: Perseus, 2006), 174-175. Dyson reveals how "Journalists outdid each other in the competitive urge to describe and remythologize the sheer horror of the huddled black masses." Dyson claims that "the message seemed to be: 'If this is how they act, if this is who they are, then their inhumanity is a justification for not rushing to their rescue.'" Dyson feels this message was echoed by viewers.

⁴ W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 7. See also: Friederich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*; and, *The Anti-Christ* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 32.

⁵ Mitchell, 7.

⁶ While viewing post-Katrina scenes from devastated New Orleans neighborhoods on September 1st, 2005, CNN Situation Room host and longtime journalist Wolf Blitzer said the following about citizens wading through the floodwater: "... So many of these people, almost all of them that we

problematize the polarizing news stories coming out of post-Katrina New Orleans by examining rumor-laden accounts from in and around the Superdome during the weeklong ordeal following Hurricane Katrina's landfall and juxtaposing them with pictures that resist these assertions. In the days after Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans, the Superdome served as a site of contested visual space where whiteness faded into the background of images, out of consciousness, while black bodies bore the burden of the white gaze.

With the fifth anniversary of Katrina's onslaught recently passed, this study uses images and narratives from in and around the Superdome to resist two assertions made by a cohort of journalists in the post-Katrina aftermath: first, that blackness is a menacing identity marker; and second, that the rebuilt Superdome is a signal of New Orleans' "rebirth." All of the images in this article can be found on blogs, websites of non-profit organizations, and various sets of photographs on the image-hosting online community Flickr. They represent a modicum of available images, produced by photojournalists and lay folk alike, capturing the horrific conditions endured by citizens of the post-Katrina Gulf Coast. These images, and countless others like them, challenge the racial essentialisms and faulty claims of representation mentioned above. This study contends that viewers can "sound the idols" of images from the Superdome to refute pejorative stories proliferated by various medias to bring this building's complex meanings into clearer view. As the post-Katrina Superdome revealed, the meaning and symbolism of a sports stadium—constructed to ease spectacle viewing for gathered fans and television audiences—changes following a "refuge of last resort" designation such as the one levied by New Orleans mayor Ray Nagin.⁷ Though it may be appealing to declare New Orleans "reborn" in the wake of a renewed stadium and a rebounding sports franchise, Americans must not distance themselves from the history this structure envelops.

The tragedy that befell New Orleans citizens is one that brought the conjoined issues of class and race to the forefront of American consciousness. If only for a moment, media consumers who previously subscribed to the notion that New Orleans was a

see, are so poor, and they are so black, and this is going to raise lots of questions for people who are watching this story unfold."

⁷ Russell McCulley, "'We Need to Pray': Katrina, the 'Perfect' Hurricane, to Hit Louisiana," *Reuters* (August 29, 2005). In his article, McCulley quotes Nagin, who refers to the Superdome as a refuge of last resort.

“cultural gumbo” saw the folly in this widely-held misconception.⁸ In fact, before Katrina hit, New Orleans was a contested space where people of disparate racial backgrounds blended tensely, like the brackish waters where the Mississippi flows into the Gulf of Mexico.⁹ But the storm and the ensuing flooding plunged eighty percent of the city under water, necessitating racial commingling. It created spectacular interzones, with the Superdome serving as the largest structure housing racially diverse evacuees. While recognizing the position of power his “racelessness” provides, Richard Dyer writes: “Race is not the only factor governing...people [who] everywhere struggle to overcome the prejudices and barriers of race, but it is never not a factor, never not in play. And since race in itself...refers to some intrinsically insignificant geographical/physical differences between people, it is the imagery of race that is in play.”¹⁰ Thus, Dyer seeks to dislodge white authority by bringing whiteness into consciousness. Though not a disaster that struck only African Americans, Katrina galvanized racial disparities in the retelling of horror stories from within the Superdome. While the majority of those stories stemmed from black pain, they were often retold and mythologized by white journalists.

In the days leading up to and during Katrina’s onslaught, news stories varied as to how many people initially made their way into the Superdome. At least 5,000 and possibly as many as 10,000 became temporary residents of this sports facility during the original hurricane surge.¹¹ As worldwide media outlets released reports detailing Katrina’s unmatched strength and potential to land a direct hit to the vulnerable city, thousands of people either unwilling or unable to leave the city limits flocked to this structure. Captured by an Associated Press photographer Dave Martin, Figure 2 offers the viewer a glimpse of some of the first several thousand New Orleans residents to enter the Superdome. Shrouding his face with his left hand, the main figure in the frame walks around the Superdome as others in the background wait in lines to enter the space. The black

⁸ Dyson, 8-9.

⁹ Dyson, 8. As Dyson notes, this process began in the 1960’s with deindustrialization: “In 1960, New Orleans was 37 percent black; in 1970 it was 43 percent black; by 1980, it was 55 percent black. In 1990 the city was 62 percent black, and by 2000 [New Orleans] was 67 percent black. As whites fled New Orleans, they turned to Jefferson Parish, which is 69.8 percent white and only 22.9 percent black; to St. Bernard Parish, which is 88.29 percent white with a paltry 7.62 percent black population; and to St. Tammany Parish, which is 87.02 percent white and 9.90 percent black. The black middle class sought refuge in Gentilly and New Orleans East, intensifying the suffering of a largely black and poor inner city.”

¹⁰ Richard Dyer, *White* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 2.

¹¹ McCulley.

people in the frame do not acknowledge the camera; they are rather captured and objectified by it. The main figure's mannerisms remain unreadable. Perhaps he wants to avoid being on film, or he could possibly be distraught, consumed by thoughts of his family; or he conceivably could be revealing his acknowledgement of Mayor Nagin's shocking admission that the storm surge "'will most likely topple our levee system' and cause severe flooding."¹² Burdened by the weight of such bold and apocalyptic assessments, the viewer senses the uneasy dread shared by the people gathered and framed outside and within the Superdome, just before the din.



Figure 2. New Orleans residents entering the Superdome. © Dave Martin, AP.

Figure 2 (and others like it) showing black individuals walking, sitting, and waiting for the storm feeds into Michel Foucault's notion of ceaseless inspection ensuring the automatic functioning of power.¹³ Rather than a single ubiquitous eye, New Orleans' displaced citizens

¹² McCulley.

¹³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Random House, 1995), 201.

endured constant surveillance from a multitude of lenses. At first glance, media outlets from various corners of the globe would seem to resist any designation as a Foucauldian power-sustaining machine—they covered Katrina and provided news of human suffering compounded by a slow-to-react U.S. government. But these same media outlets took on a secondary function in New Orleans. “By means of an omnipresent and omniscient power,” these medias played a primary role in determining what characterized, what belonged to, and what happened to individuals.¹⁴ As Johan Goldberg notes in a Katrina media retrospective, fact checking became optional. “The distortions, exaggerations and flat-out fictions being offered by New Orleans officials were accelerated and amplified by the media echo chamber... [swirling] around like so much free-floating sewage. It was as though journalistic skepticism of government officials was reserved for the White House, and everyone else got a free pass.”¹⁵ When examined using Mitchell’s photographic double consciousness, the observer becomes aware that the scenes and images emanating from the Superdome remain trapped between race-based “naïve animism and hardheaded materialism.”¹⁶ Rather than using images to vet the often redundant stories to emerge from a flooded New Orleans in the days following Katrina’s onset, a number of journalists, along with their audiences, allowed some captured photos and video footage to feed stories that vilified blackness rather than a few individuals, effectively equating darkness with criminality.

At first, few stories emerged from New Orleans in the *immediate* aftermath of Katrina. The storm struck on Monday, August 29th in the early morning and pounded the lower regions of the city with strong winds and rains, though according to one source New Orleans escaped Katrina’s fiercest winds.¹⁷ But the Superdome’s temporary inhabitants watched as the edifice constructed to house spectacles yielded to the storm, thus ensuring their place in its spectacular history. Built to withstand the gale force winds of a category three

¹⁴ Foucault, 197.

¹⁵ Jonah Goldberg, “Katrina Was Also a Media Disaster; Where are the Two-Year Retrospectives of the Journalistic Malpractice?,” *Los Angeles Times* (September 4, 2007).

¹⁶ Mitchell, 7.

¹⁷ Bary Wigmore, “City Sunk by the Wrath of Katrina,” *London Daily Mail* (August 31, 2005). Also, in her “Failing Narratives,” Nicole R. Fleetwood notes how “Katrina had weakened and made landfall as a Category 3 storm, [with] the general assessment on the morning of its arrival... that New Orleans had been spared the destruction predicted by meteorologists across the nation.” See: Nicole R. Fleetwood, “Failing Narratives, Initiating Technologies: Hurricane Katrina and the Production of a Weather Media Event,” *American Quarterly* 58.3 (September 2006), 767-789.

hurricane, the Superdome proved incapable of enduring Katrina's wrath. City residents were forced to retreat to the outskirts of the Superdome as Katrina penetrated the roof.

Taken by Tyler Hicks, a photographer for *The New York Times*, Figure 3 reveals the holes cut in the crippled complex and the light filtering through.¹⁸ The light in the frame beams down from one of the topmost contours of the fractured stadium, bathing the black body in the left center of the image in light and further darkening his frame until it resembles a silhouette. Caught in the crux created by the congruent light and stair angles, and foregrounded by two black women, this man slides between rows of plush seats toward the viewer. With eyes recessed to shadow and surrounded by flags, banners, scoreboards, and other evidence of the Superdome's intended purpose, the central figure is the only one of the three in the frame to potentially return the viewer's gaze. This image serves as an example of what Dyer calls the imagery of race. According to the author, because race is a social category rarely applied to white people, "they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, [whites] are just people."¹⁹ Unlike the foregrounded man in Figure 2, the main figure in Figure 3 does not look away from the camera lens, compelling the photographer and those viewing the image to acknowledge the ills of socialized racism and concentrated poverty, both of which plague New Orleans. By peering back at the viewer, the figure in the center forces an interaction, perhaps even a recognition of this practice of visual othering to which Dyer refers.

Starting on August 31st, reporters began circulating a deluge of stories detailing the apocalyptic conditions in New Orleans. In her article "Failing Narratives, Initiating Technologies: Hurricane Katrina and the Production of a Weather Media Event," Nicole R. Fleetwood compares Katrina's onset with the 9/11 terrorist attacks. While one can draw parallels between New York's ruinous aftermath and that of New Orleans, Fleetwood focuses on the media's haphazard rush to find and retell stories in the wake of these disastrous events:

As journalists began to assess (visually) the storm's damage across Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi, and public officials learned that the levees of New Orleans had failed, news outlets, government agencies, and

¹⁸ See page 10 of hurricanekatrina.com picture pages. Flanked by other post-Katrina images, the caption under this picture reads: "Hurricane Katrina survivors in the Superdome."

¹⁹ Dyer, 1.

emergency response organizations all scrambled to gather information even when vivid images, with often scattered and contradictory commentary, aired live.²⁰

Fleetwood maintains that reports from New Orleans were discordant at best, with inconsistency plaguing these news portrayals. The author ultimately determines that the falsified media stories that followed Katrina's onset ultimately hinged upon news outlets electing to embrace rumors while eschewing a complex read of their captured images.



Figure 3. Holes cut in the Superdome complex. © Tyler Hicks, *The New York Times*.

In one of the early stories to emerge from post-Katrina New Orleans, journalist Paul Koring found New Orleans citizens who stayed behind culpable for their collective predicament. In an accusatory style, Koring writes: “As the bodies emerge from Katrina’s receding waters—grim evidence of evacuation orders defied—hurricane experts say they have been warning for decades that not only do big storms pack a killer punch, but that those who fail to flee will pay the ultimate price.”²¹ Noting the “sad and perplexing

²⁰ Fleetwood, 767-789.

²¹ Paul Koring, “Hurricane Packs Deadly Punch; High Death Toll Could Have Been Avoided if People had Heeded Orders to Leave, Experts Say,” *The Globe and Mail* (August 31, 2005).

phenomenon of residents who refuse to flee,” Koring seems content in villanizing New Orleans citizens, charging them with insubordination for not getting into their cars and leaving.²² Throughout his piece, Koring frames his subjects as disobedient if not foolish, all the while resisting giving them a color. But an observer reading Figures 2 and 3 from Koring’s perspective recognizes his silent declaration. In Koring’s estimation, the black citizens that defied white orders are solely responsible for their suffering.

Subsequent stories further dictate public perception regarding who is involved *in* and who is to blame *for* conditions and events played out in post-Katrina New Orleans. Four news stories put out by the Associated Press, Newhouse News Service, *The New York Times*, and the London *Daily Mail* in a twenty-four hour period from August 31st to September 1st lead their respective pieces with sensational details about the mostly black bodies housed in the Superdome. All refer to hurricane victims as “refugees” at various points in their stories. All sources confirm deaths, although the numbers of the dead vary.²³ Most of these pieces show the Superdome’s population rising by at least 10,000, swelling to as many 25,000.²⁴ With scant food and water sources, disabled power supplies and sewage systems leaving conditions humid and rank, and a population increase of 150% inside the Superdome, an objective observer could not be surprised that people began revolting inside the crippled structure; the observer would rather marvel that it took a number of days to do so.

As news agencies captured this footage, the image influx of black people suffering became overwhelming. In her text *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag links exotic “placeness” with increased visibility of death and destruction: “These sights carry a double message. They show a suffering that is outrageous, unjust, and should be repaired. They confirm that this is the sort of thing

²² Dyson, 5-6. “New Orleans ranks fourth out of 297 metropolitan areas in the country in the proportion of households lacking access to cars. The top three metropolitan spots are in the greater New York area, which has the most extensive public transportation system in the country. Black households nationwide generally have far less access to cars than white households, a trend mirrored in New Orleans... [where] 27 percent of blacks... were without cars.”

²³ See Wigmore, “City Sunk by the Wrath of Katrina”; Mary Foster, “Superdome Evacuation Halted After Shots are Fired at Helicopter,” *Associated Press* (September 1, 2005); Gordon Russell, “Tensions Mount Dangerously as Superdome Refugees Await Transfer,” *Newhouse* (September 1, 2005); and Joseph B. Treaster, “At Stadium, a Haven Quickly Becomes an Ordeal,” *The New York Times* (September 1, 2005). See also: Spike Lee, *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*, 40 Acres and a Mule (2006).

²⁴ Foster, “Superdome Evacuation Halted After Shots are Fired at Helicopter.”

which happens in that place.”²⁵ Applied to post-Katrina New Orleans, Sontag’s statement is borne out in Kanye West’s admission that he could not look away despite the media’s unsavory recasting of black folk.²⁶ In a statement that reveals what Dyer would call the “human race’s” (read: “white race’s”) unique ability to dismiss much of what took place in New Orleans, Sontag continues: “The ubiquity of those photographs, and those horrors, cannot help but nourish belief in the inevitability of tragedy in the benighted or backward—that is, poor—parts of the world.”²⁷ In their article “Beyond ‘Culture’: Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference,” cultural anthropologists Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson force viewers to reexamine zones of American poverty as close kin to “third world” environments: “In the pulverized space of postmodernity, space has not become irrelevant: it has been reterritorialized in a way that does not conform to the experience of space that characterized the era of high modernity. It is this reterritorialization of space that forces us to reconceptualize fundamentally the politics of community, solidarity, identity, and cultural difference.”²⁸ When applied to post-Katrina New Orleans, Sontag’s take on the typical third world tragedy dismissal along with Gupta’s and Ferguson’s insistence on the continued relevance of space prove problematic in that they force the viewer to undertake a conceptual revision of America—one that identifies the black urban poor as a contemporary surveyed colonial subject.

In similar fashion to the New Orleans police department, reporters quickly shifted focus from space-based reporting and rescue efforts to property protection and disaster footage. Starting as early as August 31st, reporters adopted a rhetoric granting preeminence to looting, lawlessness, and anarchy. Akin to exaggerated accounts of the Superdome, journalists disproportionately reported stories of rampant looting in New Orleans. According to Dyson, these stories were often narrowly framed as “the rioting of thugs and not largely the survival activity of folk abandoned by their government, [raising] once again the specter,

²⁵ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 71.

²⁶ Dyson quotes West as saying: “I hate the way they portray us in the media. If you see a black family, it says ‘They’re looting.’ You see a white family, it says, ‘They’re looking for food.’ And...it’s been five days [waiting for the government to arrive] because most of the people are black. And even for me to complain about it, I would be a hypocrite because I’ve tried to turn away from the TV because it’s too hard to watch.” Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water*, 26-27.

²⁷ Sontag, 71.

²⁸ Gupta and Ferguson, 37.

splashed across national television, of blacks out of control.”²⁹ These stories paralleled those of the Superdome, where reports of “frustration [boiling] over into anger and fear” transformed into unconfirmed tales of assault, rape, gang activity, gunplay, and sniper fire.³⁰ As is apparent in this and other news coverage during this time, reporters made spectacle a priority.

Associated Press writer Mary Foster’s “Superdome Evacuation Halted After Shots are Fired at Helicopter” is the first in what would become a torrent of reports detailing the Superdome population’s devolution. In her piece, Foster reveals how attempts to evacuate the Superdome had been suspended on Thursday, September 1st, “after shots were reported fired at a military helicopter and arson fires broke out outside the arena.”³¹ In a rhetorical instance that calls forth the specter of panopticism, Foster reported that Ambulance Service Chief Richard Zenschlag—the man handling the Superdome evacuation—abruptly suspended operations “until they gain control of [the structure].”³² In a Foucauldian sense, even Zenschlag’s assertion that the officials at the Superdome had lost control still “[produced] the homogenous effects of power” because it reaffirmed the mediated image of a city under siege by black people run amok.³³

What remained consistent in Superdome portrayals was that, for those running the sports facility, the onset of more black bodies making their way to this sporting structure necessitated greater security, reduced freedoms, and a break from any perceived politically correct colorblindness. On September 2nd, in a thinly-veiled swipe at black residents, then-Louisiana Governor Blanco authorized 300 U.S. troops to shoot to kill “hoodlums.” In the wake of sensational stories designating victims housed in and around the Superdome as looters, rapists, thugs, crack-smoking drug addicts, and derelicts, Blanco further entrenched public perception of a New Orleans overrun by unleashed blackness. In a threat-ridden public statement, Blanco said of the troops: “They have M-16s and they are locked and loaded. These troops know how to shoot to kill, and are more than willing to do so if necessary. And I expect they will.”³⁴ President Bush reiterated Blanco’s warning, insisting that looters be

²⁹ Dyson, 114.

³⁰ Russell, “Tensions Mount Dangerously as Superdome Refugees Await Transfer.”

³¹ Foster, “Superdome Evacuation Halted After Shots are Fired at Helicopter.”

³² Foster.

³³ Foucault, 202.

³⁴ No author given, “Shoot to Kill,” *Herald Sun* (September 2, 2005).

treated with “zero tolerance.”³⁵ In the midst of these absolutist caveats villanizing black people, still shots and live CNN footage of fully-armed soldiers patrolling the Superdome with black Katrina victims flanking them became commonplace on television, the Internet, and elsewhere (see Figure 4). As Sontag notes, “Photographs objectify: they turn an event or a person into something that can be possessed. And photographs are a species of alchemy, for all that they are prized as a transparent account of reality.”³⁶ As Figure 4 reveals, the measures endorsed by Blanco and Bush to counter looting and other disobedience were extreme, if not wholly irresponsible considering the tens of thousands of residents still stranded in the city; plus, Katrina had largely produced the docile bodies Foucault mentions. Lieutenant General Russel Honoré recognized this, ordering his troops traversing streets and other public zones with weapons raised to lower them because, as Honoré recognized, “This is not Baghdad; these are American citizens.”³⁷ And yet, images portraying white soldiers on guard against black subversion proved difficult to neutralize.



Figure 4. Hurricane Katrina victim carries unconscious boy past fully-armed National Guardsmen on concourse in front of Louisiana Superdome in New Orleans, September 1st. © Michael Appleton, *New York Daily News*.

³⁵ No author given.

³⁶ Sontag, 81.

³⁷ Honoré is the three-star general Mayor Nagin granted federal authority to evacuate New Orleans on September 2nd.

In the months following Katrina's onset in New Orleans, a few self-examining journalists and scholars disseminated news stories that called into question some of the outrageous material printed shortly after the storm. In an attempt to counteract the damaging, undocumented accounts presented (and repeated) as facts, these individuals worked to parse what had become mere blame banter between black New Orleans citizens and the federal, state, and local government agencies that continued to refute black humanity. Author Tiffany Brown offers readers a different interpretation of what took place in New Orleans than the ones Koring and his counterparts present. Brown's "Wade in the Water" is a less disdainful rendering of the spectacular scenes from New Orleans. Brown writes how media coverage ensured that "the line dividing the poor from the rich became crystal clear. The reality ended up on the front pages of newspapers delivered at the door and on television sets in the homes of those who thought 'that kind of thing' only happens somewhere else."³⁸ While images from the storm did reignite debates surrounding links between poverty, color, and social displacement, along with calling into question the federal government's priorities, the discussion was eventually pushed to the periphery of America's collective consciousness, replaced by more current media events.

A *Knight Ridder* news story that came out on October 3rd, 2005 refuted earlier claims of rescue efforts being suspended due to helicopters taking on gunfire. According to Miriam Hill and Nicholas Spangler, "More than a month later, representatives from the Air Force, Coast Guard, Department of Homeland Security and Louisiana Air National Guard say they have yet to confirm a single incident of gunfire at helicopters. Likewise, members of several rescue crews who were told to halt operations say there is no evidence they were ever under fire."³⁹ Gale force winds and floodwaters disabled power and communication sources following Katrina, paralyzing city rescue workers and journalists. As Hill and Spangler note, "The storm created so much confusion that the government cannot agree on whether they issued an order to halt flights or other rescue efforts."⁴⁰ Most anyone observing post-Katrina

³⁸ Tiffany Brown, "Wade in the Water," *What Lies Beneath: Katrina, Race, and the State of the Nation* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2007), 48.

³⁹ Miriam Hill and Nicholas Spangler, "No Evidence of Shots Fired at Rescue Copters; Amid the Chaos in New Orleans After Katrina, Efforts to Save Stranded Residents Were Delayed Because of Gunfire Reports," *Philadelphia Enquirer* (October 3, 2005).

⁴⁰ Hill and Spangler.

New Orleans news coverage and the city's devastated environment can understand how exposure to the destruction could have made rescue and reporting efforts difficult. But allowing rumor to evolve into fact slowed down life-saving operations in the crippled city, doubtless costing some New Orleans citizens their lives.

Other texts seek redemption for New Orleans citizens by disseminating spectacular tales of truth-bending intrigue from the city. In "Death Rites Interrupted," Carolyn Kitch and Janice Hume rewrite part of the post-Katrina Superdome's anecdotal history. "Rumors were so strong regarding bodies in the Superdome that, according to the *Times-Picayune*, federal officials finally arrived there with a refrigerated 18-wheeler and three doctors—only to find six bodies."⁴¹ As Kitch and Hume's work shows, these and other exaggerated accounts, including the press's tendency to overreport looting incidents, branded New Orleans an apocalyptic environment and deepened public apprehension. Indeed, earlier news stories frame the post-Katrina Superdome as a space teeming with unrestrained violence and vice, exemplified by myths proclaiming that "hundreds of bodies languished" in the stadium's lower levels, which served as an unrefrigerated makeshift morgue.⁴² Other reports told of how "hundreds of bodies floated in shark-infested waters or were consumed by alligators, [while] 1,200 people had drowned in a school, [and] 30 to 40 bodies were stacked in a freezer at the New Orleans Convention Center."⁴³ Fearing that anarchy reigned in the Crescent City, government officials proceeded sluggishly with rescue efforts. These examples of rampant media exaggeration and flawed storytelling practices bring journalistic motives into question. They also dredge up the question: why were people so willing to accept these stories as truthful?

In the wake of post-Katrina New Orleans media coverage, an observer may find it necessary to reexamine Foucault's proclamation that "Our society is one not of spectacle, but of surveillance; under the surface of images, one invests bodies in depth; behind the great abstraction of exchange, there continues a meticulous, concrete training of useful forces."⁴⁴ Contemporary media outlets have found a way to unite both spectacle and surveillance, as was evident in their

⁴¹ Carolyn Kitch and Janice Hume, "Death Rites Interrupted: Responsibility and Remembrance in Coverage of the Tri-State Crematory Scandal and Hurricane Katrina," *Journalism in a Culture of Grief* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 33.

⁴² Daniel Politi, "Operation Relief," *Slate Magazine*, (September 3, 2005).

⁴³ Kitch and Hume, 33.

⁴⁴ Foucault, 217.

coverage in and around the Superdome.⁴⁵ In these instances, spectacular surveillance served to affirm a conservative, bootstrapping ideology proclaiming that New Orleans' largely black population brought on their own suffering. On his Fox News Channel program *The O'Reilly Factor*, taped shortly after Katrina made landfall, conservative pundit Bill O'Reilly co-opted footage from the Superdome and the surrounding area. At the height of insensitivity, O'Reilly opined that "Every American kid should be required to watch videotape of the poor in New Orleans and see how they suffered, because they couldn't get out of town. And then every teacher should tell the students, 'If you refuse to learn, if you refuse to work hard, if you become addicted, if you live a gangsta-life, you will be poor and powerless just like many of those in New Orleans.'"⁴⁶ O'Reilly's use of post-Katrina footage, along with his linking of poor black urban bodies with "gangsta-life"—i.e., self-elected black lawlessness—reveals a tendency to render these images as absolutisms. This visual event was, in O'Reilly's opinion, a spectacle of fear. But, as Sontag posits, "Photographs of an atrocity may give rise to opposing responses. A call for peace. A cry for revenge. Or simply the bemused awareness, continually restocked by photographic information, that terrible things happen."⁴⁷ If deconstructed in their proper complexity, the pictures that descend from the Superdome continue to contest the endorsed façade of black culpability in this tragedy. This is a great paragraph.

When Hurricane Katrina ripped the Superdome's rubber seal off, tore open the steel roof paneling and penetrated the stadium, it shed light on the conjoined problems of concentrated poverty, socialized and environmental racism, and America's ability to ignore the suffering of its own citizens. With camera lenses and lights abounding, the world viewed these problems live, as Katrina's nightmarish aftermath projected masses of black bodies onto our television screens. If only for a moment, viewers followed displaced victims and traversed the wreckage of the Superdome—a former symbol of sport-infused spectacle reborn as one of spectacular misery. But this melding of a shrine to athletic achievement and the dislocated urban poor who occupied and surrounded it provides

⁴⁵ Guy Debord argued for recognition of spectacle as a social production rather than merely a collection of images, asserting that everything that has "lived" has moved into the realm of representation—whereby images supplant the reality for which they once stood. See Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1977), 2.

⁴⁶ Dyson, 181.

⁴⁷ Sontag, 13.

evidence of a paradoxical relationship. Produced by photographer John Rowland and taken following Katrina's onset in New Orleans, Figure 5 shows a young black male streaking across the waterlogged Superdome's artificial surface. In a story that went largely unreported, the unidentified child takes part in a youth-organized touch football game played in the darkened facility.⁴⁸ Captured in a pose that reminds the viewer of Saints superstar Reggie Bush, the child battles the hopelessness that pervades the stadium and its populace by utilizing the space for its designed purpose. In Barthes's terms, this is the photograph's punctum.⁴⁹ Rendered visible by the sunlight shining through the pierced roof, this young black male may aspire to occupy a level of black achievement deemed palatable to a dominant white audience—that of professional athlete. Post-Katrina, the Superdome, which regularly exhibits sports dominated by African Americans on a grand scale, became a site where the media was able to defy black humanity. In my estimation, Figure 5 works to reassert this humanity.

The Superdome was an oddly appropriate venue for the predominately black New Orleans citizens' degradation to play out. As a sports stadium that hosted professional athletes—a profession that continues to be viewed as one of few viable ways for black children to escape poverty—the Superdome was constructed for the easy transference of spectacle to a ravenous viewing audience, both at home and in stadium seats.⁵⁰ In his book *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*, sportswriter William C. Rhoden problematizes the media-endorsed notion of the black male professional athlete as pampered mogul who controls his league. Rhoden asserts that, contrary to public perception, black athletes remain fettered to a system that masks their commodification. "In their own world, by their own definition, black athletes already [are] 'free.' Unfortunately the terms of liberation have always been defined by the white men who were responsible for their wealth."⁵¹ Akin to Rhoden's definition of sport culture, black identities from post-Katrina New Orleans became

⁴⁸ Treaster, "At Stadium, a Haven Quickly Becomes an Ordeal." The author notes: "Teenagers stuck in the dome tried to make the best of it. Two pickup squads of about 20 players, shirtless and barefoot, battled in a rather loosely structured game of touch football Wednesday afternoon, ignoring the heat. Some of the boys took the barrel-like foam rubber padding off one of the goalposts and turned it into a tackling dummy, crashing into it with powerful, smashing lunges."

⁴⁹ Barthes puts forward the term punctum, which refers to "that accident which pricks [the observer, making the image] poignant to [him or her]." See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 26-27.

⁵⁰ Originally hatched by New Orleans businessman David Dixon and Mayor Chep Morrison in 1965, the Superdome did not open its doors for business until nearly a decade later, in 1975.

⁵¹ Richard Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006), 265.

malleable products that passed through white lenses of perception. Many American citizens invite black athletes into their homes through television coverage and cheer their exploits as though postmodernism has dissolved the space between stadium and the home screen. And yet, as post-Katrina media coverage in New Orleans revealed, space allows white America to embrace certain black identities while deeming others visually offensive.



Figure 5. Young black male playing football in damaged post-Katrina Superdome, New Orleans, Louisiana, September 2005. © John Rowland, AP.

Appearing in an article in *The Starting Five*, an online publication featuring popular, race-conscious authors, Figure 6 is

entitled “Bushcares.”⁵² This rendering melds images emblematic of two opposing forces in Katrina’s aftermath: President Bush and the black citizens that he, according to Kanye West, does not care about.⁵³ Manipulated by the artist to manifest a third interpretation, “Bushcares” is a study in dialectics. The image on the left, captured by the Associated Press’s Eric Gay, shows stranded Katrina victims waiting for aid outside the Superdome. The photograph conveys exhaustion, and many of these displaced individuals look out on the wreckage surrounding them, perhaps pondering when their government will arrive. Exposed to the sweltering summer heat, these victims linger on the Superdome’s concourse—a popular alternative to the rank, humid conditions inside the disabled facility. By this time the Superdome’s degraded conditions necessitated occasional fresh air privileges in the sewage-strewn streets of “the city that hope forgot.”⁵⁴ Black people crowd the frame. The foremost woman lies prostrate, almost corpse-like, with eyes closed as those around her look around anxiously. Despite the large victim population, the viewer sees scant individuals showing any sort of movement. Visibility, it seems, is indeed a trap—one that reveals our current media panopticism as a reifying power structure.⁵⁵

Contrasting this scene of massed black humanity at the height of discomfort, President Bush’s infamous post-Katrina image, taken by the Associated Foreign Press’s Jim Watson, enters the subdivided frame on the right. Peering out an Air Force One window, the president squints with a furrowed brow and enfolded hands while absorbing the extent of Katrina’s destruction. Given its posed nature and the backstory of the former president electing to delay action, this image has become infamous on its own. According to George Lipsitz, the president, along with an American majority, equate New Orleans with its most popular tourist attraction: Bourbon Street. “Characterized by excessive drinking, lurid sex shows, and music that simulates the golden age of Dixieland jazz... this New Orleans is a place to come *to* from somewhere else not a place to live *in*, a spot

⁵² “Bushcares” is the image used at the top of Michael Tillery’s article in *The Starting Five* entitled “As Hurricane Gustav Touches Down, A Remembrance for Hurricane Katrina.” The artist’s name is not provided.

⁵³ During a live telethon, aired shortly after Katrina struck, that was aimed at assisting victims, Kanye West broke from script during a live televised fundraising event and claimed “George Bush doesn’t care about black people.” See Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water*, 27.

⁵⁴ Lee, *When the Levees Broke*. An interviewee in Lee’s *Levees* described modern-day New Orleans as “the city that hope forgot” for its consistent low rankings in country-wide polls on education systems, economic viability, access to transportation, and overall city livability.

⁵⁵ Foucault, 200.

for revelry that can be smirked about knowingly in New Orleans. [This] is the only New Orleans that the President could imagine worthy of rebuilding."⁵⁶ By uniting these two disparate images—one containing the height of American power; the other capturing a glimpse of the powerless—the unknown artist dissolves place and space divisions in order to bring black American poverty into consciousness. As Gupta and Ferguson note, “East or west, inside or outside, left or right, mound or floodplain... anthropologists have known that the experience of space is always socially constructed. The more urgent task would seem to be to politicize this uncontested observation.”⁵⁷ By juxtaposing Bush with New Orleans’s black urban poor, the artist forces the viewer to examine various binaries, including historic black/white relations and the distribution of power in the city. In the original image, Bush surveys the wreckage and suffering from high above the city; in the juxtaposition, the artist dissolves the socio-spatial disparities between the surveyor and the surveyed, thus compelling the president to atone for the ills his brand of social conservatism manifested during his tenure.



Figure 6. “Bushcares,” New Orleans, Louisiana, September 2005.
Image juxtaposition by unknown artist.

⁵⁶ Lipsitz, 238.

⁵⁷ Gupta and Ferguson, 43.

While few can argue against state and local officials playing a prominent role in the New Orleans' devolution, it is the displaced citizens of this sunken city—those who, according to some accounts, “refused” to heed ample warnings—who ultimately lose out in spite of the hypervisuality of this event. The injustices New Orleans evacuees endured have become their legacy. Kornheiser's claim in September of 2006 that the reopening of the Superdome serves as a signal of the reemergence of New Orleans negates the massed black faces whose images and stories filtered out of the Superdome wreckage a year previous and whose calls for rebuilding continue to go unheard.

Following Katrina, much of the American public revealed its continued bifurcation of black subjects into distinct realms of “acceptable” and “objectionable,” with the later designation reserved for the black urban poor who populated the Superdome. The Superdome's use as a refuge of last resort during Katrina and the ensuing coverage are doubly ironic because they reveal how viewers invite and celebrate certain African Americans in our homes via television while dismissing or vilifying others. The black citizens who stared out from the Superdome's darkened and drenched alcoves, with their stories and torments diluted or rendered mute through falsification, continue to charge America with socialized racism. Perhaps Sontag is correct in noting that people ultimately desire to have their vision of reality confirmed and their experiences enhanced by photographs.⁵⁸ Even though self-reflexive journalists and scholars have illuminated these errors, Americans remain largely complicit in their original telling because they remained, at least for a short time, untroubled. Transfixed by these early reports, world citizens stared in horror at scenes and still photos representing a terror zone similar to apocalyptic scenarios played out in Hollywood cinema. And while these same citizens have learned a great deal about the delayed and ineffective local and federal governmental response to this the worst natural disaster to strike American soil in the country's history, and cultivated or reformed their sympathetic bounds in response to the depths of human suffering played out live via satellite, the stories from within the Superdome during this brief one-week period remain shrouded in rumor, hearsay, and myth.

⁵⁸ Sontag, 24. According to the author, “[It] is an aesthetic consumerism to which everyone is now addicted.”

Composing Catastrophe: Robert Polidori's Photographs in "After the Flood" and Comparative Visual Records of Post-Katrina New Orleans

William M. Taylor

INTRODUCTION

The form of cities, their design, and their construction have long made it possible to think about human society, its representation and its values. Likewise, the destruction of cities through various means, accidental circumstance or human error, and the representation of urban ruin have given historical, visual, and narrative form to diverse values governing ethical conduct, individual desires, and collective responsibilities. In recent years a spate of natural disaster films like *Volcano* (1997), *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), and *2012* (2009) have cast the city as a prime target for cataclysm or as a place to escape from following an apocalyptic event (think of escape films like *I am Legend* [2007] and *The Road* [2010]). The appeal of these films might be understood in view of present day environmental uncertainties or perhaps a state of anxiety in the world more generally. However, their coincidence with documentary coverage of very real cataclysmic events—such as the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami's destruction of Banda Aceh and Hurricane Katrina's impact on New Orleans in 2005—leads one to question how different media represent the complex reality of a fallen city, the circumstances which bring such events about, and their social and personal costs. The coincidence between fictional and non-fictional representations and the topicality of disaster leads one to wonder if there are not interpretive parameters, disciplines, or visual economies of a kind that are wholly or partly responsible for representing the subjects one contemplates in viewing these scenes. Is their evocative appeal, content, or meaning governed by factors other than the image or the eye alone? The phrase "scopic regimes" comes to mind to describe these social, material, and conceivably psychological dimensions of vision (this phrase will be discussed in further detail later). The likely influence of these regimes prompts one to ask: how do shared perceptions and understanding and common ways of seeing and

interpreting these scenes facilitate their circulation among different kinds of audiences—potentially for different reasons and effects? Do demands placed upon them for factuality or plausibility influence our perceptions of some types of images differently than others; if so, how?

This paper takes the opportunity to reflect further on other writing about urban disaster and its representations as well as on the imagery itself.¹ Underlying this undertaking are historical and philosophical parameters that accompany perceptions of fallen cities. Historically, culturally determined ways of seeing create regimes that can be further particularized according to different contexts for viewing and interpreting images, including journalism, the milieu of fine art, and socio-legal and personal arenas, among others. In philosophical terms, awareness of change in the urban environment writ large by observations of wholesale cataclysmic collapse encourages thoughts of a more abstract kind—of the transience, complexity, or incomprehensibility of modern life, for instance, or its characterization by ceaseless transformation and risk. Both awareness of change and interpretations of its meaning are brought into sharp relief by representations of urban disasters, past and present, as well as more everyday or “ordinary” manifestations of change.

In a film like *The Day after Tomorrow*, for instance, viewers are provided with evidence of the changefulness and interdependence of natural and human-made environments (notably the changing weather and the vulnerability of cities to its extremes). Many of these phenomena seem “ordinary” at first, but are rendered ominous by the scriptwriter, director, and cinematographer as manifestations of global climate change, by hinting at human excess and unsustainable behavior and portending the collapse of civilization. There is no one single or easy reading here. The film’s leanings towards dramatic excess have been both celebrated by environmental activists for emphasizing the dire consequences of climate change and condemned by some experts for getting its science wrong.² Likewise, the “facts” served up in documentaries like Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) and the personal stories narrated in Spike Lee’s *When the Levees Broke* (released in the same year) make for a datum of historical evidence to confirm or contest the details of fictional accounts on film and television screens of late—though of course neither of these films

¹ Taylor, William M. “Urban disasters: visualising the fall of cities and the forming of human values.” *Journal of Architecture* 11:5 (2006), 603–611.

² Monbiot, George. “A hard rain’s a gonna fall.” *The Guardian* (May 14, 2004).

are in themselves immune to charges of bias. Changefulness is given narrative form by cinematic and documentary films which cast the city as a stage for momentous events, just as it is implicated in more static and two-dimensional images of fallen cities, like the many photographs taken in the days following the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 or after Hurricane Katrina's destruction of New Orleans in 2005.

This paper focuses on the latter medium, specifically Robert Polidori's photographs of New Orleans following Katrina. The images comprising *After the Flood*, the title of Polidori's exhibition shown at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (2006)³ and the accompanying book/catalog, are meant to be an evocative reminder—a "psychological witness" according to the book jacket—of the lives interrupted when the fabric of a city is destroyed (Figure 1). One can question what this means. Does witnessing require factuality, conveyed by images that are, by some measure, accurate representations of a subject? Or, does it more likely demand the subjective interpretation, by the photographer and his audience, of an event and picture? Can either approach make for lessons that are both generally recognizable and personally meaningful?

After some reflection on urban disaster and its representation in history, this paper will describe the particular environmental sensibilities engaged by Polidori's photographs. These sensibilities are foregrounded by historical developments resulting in a particular way of seeing, but are further reinforced by viewing the images themselves. The paper questions how these sensibilities circumscribe the photographer's role as an eyewitness to Katrina's wake and the viewer's relationship to the scenes his photographs convey. Perceptual awareness of the myriad of organic and inorganic, meteorological and hydrological phenomena accompanying the inundation of the city and recorded in these images links the photographer's project to other contemporary representations of disaster. They include those in popular cinema as well as other visual records of Katrina. Environmental awareness forms one parameter for interpreting images of this kind and locates them within a cultural milieu, a distinctly modern and arguably "Western" one. This is a regime in which changing understandings of nature—notably changes where an understanding of nature's wholeness

³ Metropolitan Museum of Art. "Robert Polidori: After the Flood." 2006. http://www.metmuseum.org/special/new_orleans/images.asp, (accessed 15 November 2010); Polidori, Robert. *After the Flood* (London: Steidl, 2006).

characterizing pre-Enlightenment thought give way to modern and complex perceptions of organic existence—are linked to particular interpretations and values. Awareness of the myriad actions and reactions governing climate, geo-physical and organic nature, and perceptions of human involvement in these images foreground a key political debate concerning the “natural” or “human” origins of the disaster that befell New Orleans.

Polidori’s photographs are positioned to be a wake-up call for governments and their constituents, urban planners, engineers, and architects. They point out what is at stake when such an inundation occurs and consequently threatens the forms of social stability, security, and “normalcy” the built environment can engender. This paper suggests that doubt is engendered by this particular kind of awareness, resulting from disquiet and uncertainty as to what one is looking at—the cause, in the end, for Polidori’s scenes of destruction. It requires one to question any easy distinction between fictional and non-fictional representations of such an event. Doubtfulness partly accounts for the mixed character of the photographer-as-artist versus her or his role as an observer, thereby making the position of witness a fluid one at best. The framing of the photographs, the images’ technical and artistic mastery, and their positioning within a celebrated museum make them more than mere documents or factual records of a historical episode. Viewers of these photographs are likewise called upon to supply the missing pieces or elements in narratives explaining the destruction. Most are likely to draw upon prior knowledge of how water moves, rises or falls, and inflicts damage. Some may distill from the images a sense of what was there before the flood or possibly imagine what may follow by way of apportioning blame and demanding reparation for the victims. This makes all viewers likely witnesses to Katrina, though the range of observations possible does not necessarily point to an unequivocal public record.

REPRESENTING URBAN DISASTERS

The Jan T. Kozak Collection at the University of California at Berkeley provides a useful starting point for understanding the history of visual regimes governing urban disasters and their

representation.⁴ Largely the work of a geoscientist, the collection is an online archive comprising several hundred images of “allegorical” and historical earthquakes and supports research into seismology and earthquake engineering. It portrays the impact of earthquakes on cities in times past, from Sparta, in ancient Greece (destroyed 464 B.C.) to Messina, in Eastern Sicily (1908). Many of these images seem intended to capture the moment of disaster as though to encompass in a single frame a chain of events culminating in catastrophe. The collection of woodcut prints, lithographs, and paintings is telling, not only of the longstanding impact upon the western imagination of disasters, but of the particular perceptions and values brought to bear on such representations relative to a given period.

For instance, in the accompanying image (Figure 2), identified in the collection as a “medieval” view (executed in 1493) of some unknown biblical earthquake, the buildings represent northern European architecture as it was perceived in late 15th century Europe. A church, complete with Christian cross, towers, and remnants of a town gate and walls, equally communicate (anachronistically, given the scene depicted is probably from the Old Testament) understanding of what an ancient city at the moment of its destruction would look like. By comparison, another image (Figure 3), depicting the destruction of Lisbon by earthquake, fire, and tsunami in 1755 (executed in 1887) is more readily associated with the perceptions of a more secular age, exhibiting features of a seemingly more accurate account (by today’s measure) of the movements of the earth’s crust, its earthquakes, and floods. Drama is equally in evidence in this latter illustration, though the image’s visual realism corresponds to a more modern showing of the facts (seismic, hydrological, and social, among others), leading to an understanding of cataclysm that prevailed at the time. The Lisbon earthquake of 1755 is often described in terms of it being the first “secular disaster.” This is partly owing to the many period representations made of it (such as Figure 3), the rapidity with which they spread across Europe, and the considerable commentary on the event’s significance.⁵ One could compare the social and political character of

⁴ Jan T. Kozak Collection: Macro seismic Images of Historical Earthquakes. Pacific Earthquake Engineering Research Center. University of California at Berkeley.
<http://nisee.berkeley.edu/kozak> (accessed 15 November 2010)

⁵ Jack, Malcolm. “Destruction and regeneration: Lisbon, 1755.” Eds. Braun and Radner. *The Lisbon Earthquake of 1755* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2005), 7-20; James, Charles and Kozak, Jan. “Representations of the 1755 Lisbon Earthquake.” *The Lisbon Earthquake of 1755* (details as above), 21-33. See also: Tobringer, Stephen. “Earthquakes and Planning in the 17th and 18th Centuries.” *Journal of Architectural Education* 33:4 (1980), 11-15.

much of this historical commentary with worldwide reactions to 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina. Likewise, emerging communication networks that allowed for the close scrutiny of Lisbon's rebuilding prefigure the global media coverage given to the plight of New Orleans and the slow pace of its reconstruction.



Figure 2. Medieval illustration of biblical earthquake (1493).
Courtesy of the National Information Service for Earthquake Engineering, EERC,
University of California, Berkeley



Figure 3. View of the Lisbon earthquake, November 1st, 1755.

From Hartwig, Georg Ludwig. *Volcanoes and Earthquakes:*

A Popular Description in the Movements in the Earth's Crust. London. 1887.

Courtesy of the National Information Service for Earthquake Engineering, EERC,
University of California, Berkeley

Together, these and other historical images reveal the city to be an important and longstanding vehicle for thinking about the philosophical issues and values attendant to urban disaster. Stories describing such events—some entailing the dispersal of entire peoples as a result—form a recurrent theme within the Judeo-Christian tradition in particular. Illustrating the workings of divine justice, many commonly entail assertions of a divide between right and wrong and between causes and effects of a certain, moral kind. Biblical accounts of The Tower of Babel, Babylon, and the twin cities of Sodom and Gomorrah are telling in this way, while their portrayal throughout the history of Western art reveals variations on a common theme. In one of the earliest known representations of the Tower of Babel, on an ivory panel carved sometime between the years 1050 and 1080 at the cathedral in Salerno (Italy), the oversized figure of an omnipotent God descends from heaven to disperse the tower builders. In Pieter Bruegel the Elder's well-known painting of "The Tower of Babel" (1563), one finds a secular and worldly significance attributed to the story. Typically, in illustrations from

this period onwards, an emphasis on the details of construction (foreboding its subsequent destruction) transforms the Tower into an immense, though vulnerable, hive of human industry emblematic of the city itself. Further variations on this mixed theme of common purposes and thwarted social ambitions can be seen in some 19th century salon paintings. Conceivably, the chief attraction of Théodore Géricault's "The Raft of the Medusa" (1818-1819) is not the storm-tossed raft shown, but the community of citizens that the painting allegorically represents.⁶ Likewise, on William Strutt's immense canvas "Black Thursday, February 6th, 1851" (executed 1864) the raging Australian bushfire is arguably only the backdrop for what is really on show: the terror-stricken, mobile "city" of fleeing settlers, their livestock, and their belongings.

Compared to and growing out of these intertwined philosophical and artistic traditions, one can argue that a uniquely modern and ecologically nuanced way of thinking about our surroundings is related to particular patterns of sentiment, perceptions, and anxiety organized around the built environment and its relationship to nature.⁷ What is interesting when considering past sources for contemplating disaster is that something akin to our understanding of the environment does not exist at all. Recent representations of urban disaster, in science fiction and on the screen—equally, in Polidori's photographs—though distantly related by earlier ancient, biblical, or allegorical catastrophes, are not entirely encompassed by them. Rather they owe more to this environmental way of thinking.

Consider the spectacular visual effects of films like *Armageddon* (1998) or *The Day After Tomorrow* or the 1970's blockbuster movies that are their precursors. It is interesting to question how these films engage with the narratives that accompany the rise of empirical science and its fictionalization, particularly since the time of Darwin. In *Armageddon*, for instance, an enormous meteor threatens to crash into the earth just as similar impacts are believed to have once extinguished life on the planet. In *The Day After Tomorrow* scenes of cracks appearing abruptly in arctic ice or birds flying south out of season are made to prefigure worse disruptions to life to come. They are the effects of some undiscovered force likely to have an impact on

⁶ Much has been written on this painting, its aesthetic and social contexts, and also its political overtones. A good account is given in Miles, Jonathan. *The Wreck of the Medusa* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2007).

⁷ Taylor, William M., *The Vital Landscape: nature and the built environment in 19th century Britain* (Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, 2004).

organic nature and human society as a whole. In the *Poseidon Adventure* (1972) and the *Towering Inferno* (1974), a tsunami-stricken and capsized ocean liner and a burning high-rise are not only emblems of an imperiled society. The imprisoning structures also introduce characters to the contingency and uncertainty of raw nature so that survival will only reward the fittest among them. These film narratives entail representations of causes and effects, actions and reactions whereby everyday physical phenomena and potentially cataclysmic events are meant to be understood (however partially or imperfectly) in terms of underlying natural forces—allowing for the possibility that these may be interfered with, for better or worse, by humankind.

These narratives raise questions of the predictability, likelihood, or inevitability of one or the other natural event—the degree to which one can predict the weather, for instance, or of the likelihood of an earthquake, a fire, or disastrous flood. These narratives delimit an ethical domain whereby human actions enter into equations that determine a range of phenomena impinging upon its designs—actions modeled along, as Immanuel Kant would write, the “oscillations of the weather and biological and other natural phenomena.” These words are taken from an essay Kant wrote in 1784 entitled, “The Idea of History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View” in which the author described the unfolding of human actions in the world to be as predictable, if not as obvious, as the facts of life and death—even the weather.⁸ Whereas in the natural world, the passage of time was registered on the bodies and forms of animate and inanimate matter, in the human world, for Kant and many who followed a similar line of thought, it was “the city” upon which was written the movement of history. Kant’s essay prefigures a significant shift in the visualization of urban disaster, where fallen cities are seen not so much as a consequence of divine wrath or representation of an unforgiving natural world that followed the fall of Adam. Rather, this imaginative shift involves a move towards a more objective, specifically causal understanding of such phenomena, so that human responses to disaster move away from forms of penance and towards a calculation of probabilities and likelihoods whereby natural, cataclysmic events become understood in new and complex ways.⁹

⁸ Cited in Hacking, Ian. *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 16.

⁹ An important development in this process coincided with the rise of the empirical sciences. Various sciences, from those more immediately concerned with an abstract understanding of nature like chemistry and physics to others more obviously aimed at predicting and controlling natural forces—like geophysical sciences (including seismology, meteorology, and hydrology),

Consequently, by means of this conceptual shift, the city is understood in relation to observations of organic and inorganic nature and nature's constituent elements like earth, air, and water. Understanding, predicting, and reacting to the forces that act upon a city and which make it a part of the geophysical and organic worlds—invoking a broad kind of environmental awareness—highlight the human structures and dwellings affected by disaster, the sites upon which they once stood, and the cities of which they were a part. Photographs of destroyed cities, like those of the San Francisco earthquake or inundation of New Orleans, reveal the physical and social structures of a city by means of recording the traces left upon them by the movement of earth and water respectively. In the case of Polidori's images, they make for viewing that moves both inward—close-up to discern the multiple and sometimes minute traces left by rising and receding floodwater—and then outwards to survey wholesale inundation. This viewing requires a kind of mixed perceptive, cognitive, and moral self-positioning by the viewer that results neither in entirely "factual" understanding as regards the objective content of the images nor results in a situation that is wholly "interpretive," implying an infinite range of meanings. Rather, this positioning entails a kind of visual regime that enlists varied discourses on Katrina and its aftermath, degrees of background knowledge and opinion (informed or otherwise)—and sometimes personal experience—in order to judge the significance of what is being seen. By comparison, the pre- or early-modern images in the Kozak Collection were seen differently relative to their times and prevailing social expectations. Factuality could mean something different, particular when empiricism and its forms of causal reasoning were less common, if exerting a determining influence at all. It would be hard to say Kozak's pictures were "read" in the modern sense of the word—that they were perceived as meaningful and subjectively interrogated along one or several recognized lines of investigation and self-questioning and that meanings were then channeled through modern discourses, media, and language.

ROBERT POLIDORI "AFTER THE FLOOD"

building statics, and engineering—have played a role in determining how we view, understand, and respond to "the city" and to urban disasters. Though concerned with different objects of study, these fields commonly bring into play forms of causal reasoning (basically, thinking that one action results in another) and encourage awareness of the myriad of forces and counter-forces acting upon the city. See *The Vital Landscape*, Chapter 4 "Elemental Existence", 95-119.

Robert Polidori's photo essay *After the Flood* provides a fitting set of images to illustrate the key themes of this paper. Having previously made subjects of such phenomena as the slow decay of Havana, the bombed out remains of Beirut, and the abandoned, contaminated cities of Chernobyl and Pripyat, he turned his camera on New Orleans in the weeks following its inundation in September 2005. His photographs, mainly of the ruined facades and the interiors of houses, simply identified by their street address, capture not so much a moment of disaster but the multiple and complex interactions of so many physical, organic, and inorganic "events" initiated when the city's levees broke. They portray the inevitable interruption of innumerable manifestations of human activity. As John Updike wrote in his review of the MOMA exhibition:

Arresting though the outdoors photos are, with their silent testimony to a catastrophe that swept through humble neighborhoods accustomed to being ignored, it is the wrecked, mildewed interiors that take our eye and quicken our anxiety. Would our own dwelling quarters look so pathetic, so obscenely reflective of intimate needs inadequately met, if they were similarly violated and exposed?¹⁰

The scenes are chaotic in one sense, though they invite one to imagine what happened, logically and predictably, after the waters rose then subsided. The scenes are "alive" in this sense, as there appears considerable evidence of upheaval and warping, rotting, and mildewing, all presumably still going on at the time the photographs were taken. They also appear static given the staged character of the photographs that, though random in their content of overturned and decaying belongings, are conventionally executed from fixed vantage points, with carefully-framed shots and considered lighting. The architectural photographer's desire for images free of people was conveniently satisfied by the depopulated state of the city, rather than any obvious action on the part of Polidori. Another reviewer of the exhibition writes:

The inevitable rush of sympathy and pity elicited by these pictures is soon joined by a forensic impulse. We scan the

¹⁰ Updike, John. "After Katrina." *New York Review of Books* 53:19 (2006), 8-12

wreckage with accumulating questions about the residents' lives, their shoes and hobbies, the souvenirs they collected and the fancy chandeliers they prized. There are questions, too, about income and race, poverty and destiny, all of which may be a rational refuge from the over-whelming urgency of the real mystery: what on earth has become of the people?¹¹

The cover photograph for the exhibition catalog anticipates many of these mixed qualities characterizing images inside the text ([Figure 4](#)). The house at 2732 Orleans Avenue is positioned obliquely, relative to the camera lens, as though it were simply a conventional typological study of building facades. The attention to detail invited by this genre of visual representation (common in many architecture books) gradually reveals evidence for an event that is far from straightforward. Signs of moderate building decay that are commonly and picturesquely included in books on New Orleans and its architectural heritage are amplified and rendered ominous as the eye detects additional signs of ruination in the parallel lines of oil and other stains left by the receding water. These extend to adjacent buildings and material surfaces leading the viewer to anticipate the line naturally spreading across the immediate neighborhood and possibly the entire city. The car is similarly stained, pushed on top of the curb by the force of water and left at an angle to the sidewalk as though abandoned following a hold-up getaway or roadside accident. The kitchen depicted at 5417 Marigny Street is typical of the interior images in *After the Flood*. An upended refrigerator and overturned cupboards, extended drawers and displaced appliances, all covered with mud and debris, contrast with household items that seem securely placed or hanging above the high water line ([Figure 5](#)).

The photographs comprising *After the Flood* are noteworthy in that they do not communicate obvious or dramatic action which, conversely, characterizes many of the images in the Kozak collection or a Hollywood disaster film. They are composed, but not heroic in the sense that old woodcut prints, lithographs, or paintings of collapsing buildings, turbulent seas, and raging bushfire scenes—or the statuesque victims and survivors who people them—can be. The photographs are conceivably moralizing, but not in the visually explicit and “old-fashioned” way that Salerno’s ivory carving of the Tower of Babel seems to modern eyes. Some audiences may

¹¹ Vetrocq, Marcia. “New Orleans, Lost and Found.” *Art in America* 95:3 (2007), 141

nonetheless discern in them evidence of divine retribution.¹² Polidori's photographs are perhaps (if any photograph could be) more Darwinian than a Bruegel, Géricault, or Strutt painting could ever have been. Nurturing an unsettling fascination for the abundance of furnishings, household goods, materials, and surfaces that comprise the everyday interior of the home, the photographs reveal the invisible forces of decay working upon them. Polidori's scenes deal with the reality of "overcrowding, waste and disorder" that concerned Darwin and his followers and which provided the worldview behind theories of cataclysmic upheaval and natural selection.¹³ Equally, the viewer's absorption in the minute details of the images—the innumerable instances of ruin—can be counterpoised by fascination with the wholeness and the plenitude of nature that inspired theologians and artists in early- and pre-modern times as well as its seemingly irresistible force. Providing the logical counter-image to an idealized home, such that views of chaos supplant an idyll of domestic order and bliss, the photographs implicate the reality of randomness and chance characterizing modern life. All the while, they call upon our expectations of order as well as other kinds of background knowledge to heighten their dramatic impact. Above all, the photographs engage with an environmental sensibility portending modern life—entailing in its most basic terms an awareness of particular spaces, streetscapes, and rooms as unique, ominous, and formative of human identity, character, and well-being—the latter, now obviously lost. Attentiveness to the "placefulness" of cities as the probable sites for momentous events and the uncertain dangers hidden in even their most intimate spaces is cultivated in many disaster films, as well as Polidori's photographs. The couch shown in the living room at 5417 Marigny Street ([Figure 6](#)) seems only slightly askew, as though moved to facilitate spring cleaning (the vacuum rests on an adjacent side-chair). Coupled with other objects, however, such as the furniture and fixtures piled on it by the receding flood waters and the background covered in the same patina of mold and decay, a scene of

¹² Notably, there were those people who, in the aftermath of Katrina, saw the city rightfully destroyed for its "embrace of sin." Reported by Dewan, S. "Lady Liberty Trades in Some Trappings." *Memphis Journal* (July 5), electronic website edition. <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/05/us/05liberty.html?ex=1309752000&en=633335bb68bac96a&ei=5088>, (accessed 15 November 2010).

¹³ Levine, George. *Darwin and the novelists: patterns of science in Victorian fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 34–39.

heightened disorder appears—a jungle almost, of moving, changeful material surfaces.

Polidori's camera fixes these movements and material transformations. But another important part of these photographs is that the viewer approaches them with some knowledge of the hurricane, New Orleans itself, and the fact that the city rests largely below sea-level. Prior knowledge of this kind and degree characterizes the "reading" of these and other scenes of disaster (including two comparable visual records of New Orleans, post-Katrina, introduced shortly) so that, in each case, images are never entirely transparent to an extant reality. Prior knowledge alerts one to the possibility—now the certainty according to government officials in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers—that the cause of the disaster was not entirely "natural." The storm left the city relatively unscathed after passing over it, yet Katrina's waters, working on a poorly maintained levee system, caused them to collapse. The city's pumps, once the largest in the world and the pride of a robust civil engineering and public service sector, failed to deliver as they were but barely operational. Additionally, of course, the broader issue of global warming that may have spawned so large a storm in the first place furthers a sense of portentousness about the photographs. Among the range of likely factors contributing to the ruined kitchen or living room scenes at 5417 Marigny Street, for instance, we are left wondering about their ultimate, final cause. As representations of urban disaster of a particular kind, Polidori's images represent "the city" as a part of nature and site for all-important social relations that require maintenance and civil justice.

Accompanied by extensive press coverage and conflicting evidence regarding the cause of the inundation of New Orleans in the years immediately after the storm, Polidori's images draw upon our knowledge, however incomplete, of causes and effects, actions and reactions whereby everyday physical phenomena and potentially cataclysmic events are understood in terms of underlying natural forces in which humankind has had a hand. Part of their dramatic effect (which provokes some questions about the ethical issues they raise) is based on the exploitation of uncertainty that has always accompanied the expansion of science and our reliance on standards of objectivity (scientific, empirical, and others) as a means of explaining things. These standards account for a certain ambiguity in assessing the "documentary" or "aesthetic," the "factual" or "interpretive" qualities of the images—distinctions that give the idea behind "scopic regimes" some of its theoretical saliency. Coined by

Christian Metz in a study of film and psychoanalysis and introduced to the English-speaking academy by Martin Jay, the phrase has become a convenient tag for contextualizing practices of “visuality.”¹⁴ The idea supplants a common-sense view that images “speak” for themselves—that they are largely self-evident, transparent, and intrinsically objective. By counterpoising the “social” and constructed and the “visual” and ideally transparent, thoughts on scopic regimes animate the play of these and similar sources of value. Scopic regimes of one kind or another circulate within and between various academic disciplines and support theories of the domains of power, knowledge, and subjectivity. Partly because of their ambiguity (involving “inward” and “outward” ways of looking that are simultaneously empirical and contextualizing) Polidori’s images provide evidence for contemplating the strata of social relations, material culture, and, particularly, the environmental sensibility (our expectations, hopes, and fears, for our surroundings), which bring these domains of experience together. They invite us, drawing in some measure on the authority of an art museum and the aesthetic appeal of a coffee-table book, to scrutinize familiar objects of domestic life to discern just what has “gone wrong” in the scenes conveyed (the warping, rotting, and mildew) and then compel us to ask ourselves “Why?”

Further highlighting these relations between images and ways of seeing, there are different kinds of photographs taken of New Orleans “after the flood.” In order to distinguish Polidori’s journalistic and fine art perspective on scenes of urban disaster from others, consider two additional sets of photographs, in particular, that have been largely overlooked by writers on Katrina and its aftermath so far. Each served specific purposes and was directed to distinct audiences.

The first set of images highlights the subjective and sentimental aspects of Katrina’s photographic record. It was directed to the many victims who lost prized photographs of family members and friends, familiar places, and important events. This set arose in the innumerable instances of image sharing, photograph reproducing, and exchanging in the days and months after disaster struck, as victims realized that the extent of their loss included the visual record of their entire lives, loved ones, and homes. Yet to be commented on as far as I can tell, this “collection” became an important feature of

¹⁴ Jay, Martin. “Scopic Regimes of Modernity.” *Vision and Visuality*. Ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988), 29–50.

post-Katrina life and an elusive visual record of far greater extent than the images in *After the Flood*. They comprise, in a manner of speaking, the “before” shots counterpoising Polidori’s views of “after” the flood, though this prefiguring does not diminish their own distinctiveness and value. Some of these lost, possibly reproduced, and retrieved images are evident in *After the Flood*, photographed as fixed to water-stained and mold-ridden walls, resting atop furniture rising above the high water line, or scattered among the detritus cast upon sodden, warped, and rotting floors. They appear in Polidori’s view of 5000 Cartier Avenue as the family portrait perched precariously on an organ or a graduation portrait fallen from its hook ([Figure 7](#)). Unlike Polidori’s work there is nothing necessarily authoritative or “official” about this other collection. Many are obviously “staged” (like a scene from a family picnic) though this hardly makes them works of art in a conventional sense. However, imagine if the viewer were equipped with a victim’s intimate knowledge of their provenance and memorable place in personal, family, and domestic experiences. They would be able to appreciate and possibly participate, emotionally and empathetically, in the ruptured social fabric which Polidori’s images are only able to invoke from a distance, from the exhibition wall or catalog page. Though disparate, and seemingly “ad-hoc” compared to the photographer’s, the family images may be, in one sense, more “real.”

The second set of images has provided material evidence for the destruction in ways that Polidori’s photographs have not—basically, because these photographs were intended and prepared as evidence from the start. These were the images made for insurance companies. This set was formed by the countless photographs of damaged homes, interiors, and furnishings taken by distressed homeowners (and possibly insurance company and government relief representatives) that record another aspect of the personal response to Katrina—one of fear brought on by forms of emotional, familial, short- and long-term financial insecurity generated by the loss, wholly or partly, of one’s neighborhood, home, and its possessions. These images have yet to be addressed critically, but they circulate—mainly in digital form—in far greater numbers than Polidori’s images. For every one of the shots comprising *After the Flood*, there are conceivably many tens of thousands, less carefully

framed, darkly-lit, and stitched-together images showing similar scenes (Figure 8).¹⁵



Figure 8. House near the Canal Street levee breach, New Orleans, Louisiana, December 2005. Photo by the author.

There is a visual ambiguity and doubt in this second category of Katrina photography that is more socio-legal than intentionally provocative, purposively “artistic” or necessarily sentimental. Consider how in parts of the United States, including Louisiana, reasoning governing the identification and mitigation of storm-

¹⁵ The figure shown is not an image from the set of insurance photographs. Rather, it stands in for them in the paper. The photograph could have illustrated a third set of photographs, in addition to Polidori’s and the other two. These were the images taken by tourists, former residents and academics (such as the author), and a host of other people interested in Katrina and New Orleans and (hopefully) concerned by what they were seeing. There is not enough time to do justice to these photographs, though reactions to the commonly-called “disaster tours” provided by local tour companies sparked considerable debate in the city about the ethics and purposes served by this kind of spectatorship. Widespread pain as well as the now infamous photograph taken of George W. Bush looking down on the city from Air Force One remained fresh on many people’s minds.

incurred risk dictates that evidence for water damage can take two forms. One must look for signs of either flooding, caused by rising water, or, alternatively, storm damage, caused by falling or wind-blown water. Given the widespread views, neo-liberal or otherwise, of the incapacity of the government to get its own house in order, much less fathom the workings of nature, prevailing thought dictates that private corporations are better suited to distinguish between the two likely causes of damage. More reliably than government or independent insurance assessors, corporate insurers are better able to determine limits of liability. The government acts as the insurer of last resort for regions prone to flooding (or earthquake and bushfire, for that matter—so called “acts of God”) where publicly-funded insurance is available and purchased. However, it is the responsibility of private corporate authorities to determine in which instances the government must pay for damage incurred by the insured. Litigation and further anxiety inevitably follows, as it has in Louisiana in storm-damaged areas, as corporations attempt to limit their exposure and pass on costs for reconstruction to the taxpayer. In cases where disaster relief is promised, this situation—which, in effect, constitutes an unacknowledged form of corporate welfare—is equally problematic as funds can be tied to all kinds of measures that further enlist and benefit the corporate sector in the provisioning of relief. Ambiguity in photographs of storm (or flood) damage circumscribes their status as evidence of an uncertain kind. In other words, while the casual viewer may wonder what the scenes are about, corporate interests are given reign to fix their meaning.

On the whole, these different sets of images—Polidori’s collection, the photographs of loved ones, and the images of insurance damage—either depict or give meaning to (by counterpoising them) similar scenes of ruin, however they engage different, though conceivably overlapping, visual economies. Similarly, the sets draw the viewer’s attention to an environmental context (calling on both nature and human culture) for interpreting the damage wrought by the storm and associated human, technical, and political failures. They are all equally provocative, if not equivalent in artistic intention and execution, reception, and use, to the acclaimed photographer’s work.

The images compiled for insurance companies to substantiate countless claims for compensation serve an evidential purpose similar to Polidori’s intention to act as “witness.” In contrast, however, the former are associated less with aesthetic predilections and the rules of museums and publishing houses. In practical terms,

unlike Polidori's collection, were the sets of photographs of either loved ones or insurance damage to appear in public for some reason, their display would not, most likely, raise concerns over intellectual property rights associated with the images. (Along with ways of seeing associated with environmental and other kinds of awareness, proprietorship can also play a role in "scopic regimes." This partly explains why Polidori's photographs are not reproduced in this paper). Perhaps due to their ubiquity, but near public invisibility, both the photographs of loved ones and insurance damage provide better testimony to the extent of urban disaster in New Orleans than any collection likely to be shown in an art gallery or revealed in an exhibition catalog. They evince the personal losses, the uncertainty, and the relative absence of retribution following in Katrina's wake.

CONCLUSION

Like the narratives of recent disaster films, Polidori's photographs invite a distinctly modern kind of discernment, and this underscores their value as evidence for the extent and character of destruction wrought on New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina. With knowledge of the storm, its impact, the subsequent failure of the city's flood defenses, and the range of explanations for the broken levees, the photos also implicate human agency in the city's demise. I have called this kind of discernment "environmental" because it raises a context for understanding the relationships arising between human beings, their culture, and their living and non-living surroundings—the subject of environmental studies.¹⁶ Broadly speaking, this way of looking at photographs is "scientific"—empirical and deductive—though this does not mean that interpretations of the images are necessarily certain and unequivocal. Polidori's photographs invite us to distinguish between what we see and most likely know and what we do not see, but suspect. Assessment of their factuality or plausibility has a bearing on the range of consequences and human responses that might follow.

¹⁶ Bullock, Alan & Stallybrass, Oliver. *The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought* (London: Fontana, 1983 edition, originally published, 1977), 207.

FIGURES

Figure 1: Book cover, Robert Polidori. *After the Flood*. Steidl. 2006.

Publisher's website URL:

<http://www.steidlville.com/books/423-After-the-Flood.html>

[accessed 15 November 2010]

Figure 2: Medieval illustration of biblical earthquake (1493). Image source: Courtesy of the National Information Service for Earthquake Engineering, EERC, University of California, Berkeley

Figure 3: View of the Lisbon earthquake, November 1st, 1755. From Hartwig, Georg Ludwig. *Volcanoes and Earthquakes: A Popular Description in the Movements in the Earth's Crust*. London. 1887. Image source: Courtesy of the National Information Service for Earthquake Engineering, EERC, University of California, Berkeley

Figures 4 – 7: Photographs from Robert Polidori's *After the Flood* exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. MOMA special exhibition website: URL:
http://www.metmuseum.org/special/new_orleans/images.asp
[accessed November 1st, 2010]

Figure 8: House near the Canal Street levee breach, New Orleans, Louisiana, December 2005. Photo by the author.

FILMOGRAPHY

2012 (2009), Roland Emmerich, Columbia Pictures.

An Inconvenient Truth (2006), Davis Guggenheim, Paramount.

Armageddon (1998), Michael Bay, Touchstone Pictures.

I am Legend (2007), Francis Lawrence, Warner Brothers.

The Poseidon Adventure (1972), Ronald Neame & Irwin Allen, 20th Century Fox.

The Day After Tomorrow (2004), Roland Emmerich, 20th Century Fox.

The Road (2009), John Hillcoat, Dimension Films.

Towering Inferno (1974), John Guillermin & Irwin Allen, 20th Century Fox.

When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts (2006), Spike Lee, HBO.

Volcano (1997), Mick Jackson, 20th Century Fox.

The *Kamp Katrina* Project: A Conversation with the Filmmakers

Charles Gentry, Ashley Sabin, and David Redmon

“Kamp Katrina” was supposed to provide a communal shelter in the aftermath of the devastating storm of late summer 2005. The tent village was located in the garden backyard of a house on Alvar Street, in the post-Katrina “melting pot” of New Orleans’ Upper 9th Ward. The inhabitants included the homeowners—an eclectic Native American woman known as Ms. Pearl and her husband David Cross, the owner of a home-repair business—and their traumatized guests, who are mostly poor, white, working-class addicts and survivors. Although it is inspiring to witness the dedication and generosity of the hosts, there is also a necessary toughness in their mission, as campers are evicted for fighting, stealing, or substance abuse. Maybe most viewers are not surprised to see the social order break down as it surely does at Kamp Katrina, yet many critics have noted the film’s unexpected beauty and artfulness.

This is what makes the documentary *Kamp Katrina* so compelling; the filmmakers have an uncanny knack for capturing the dogged spirit of the modern city that Joseph Roach described as a “behavioral vortex” in his book *Cities of the Dead* (Columbia UP, 1996). *Kamp Katrina* is the follow-up film to Redmon’s *Mardi Gras: Made in China* (2006), which is an enlightening portrait of the culture of pre-Katrina New Orleans that juxtaposes the “girls gone wild” revelry of the city’s carnival atmosphere with the poverty and exploitative working conditions of Chinese laborers. Asked by one critic whether they staged scenes or used dubious trickery to achieve the *Kamp Katrina*’s “movielike smoothness,” Redmon stated their position plainly: “Asking people to do or repeat scenes of horror is where we draw the ethical line.” While at Kamp Katrina, a survivor named Ron greets the camera by saying “Welcome to the new Third World,” which is just one of many moments that simultaneously depicts the uncertainty of New Orleans’ future due to this predicament and the local determination to be re-born after massive death, destruction, and displacement.

It is the experience of the filmmakers that sets this project apart from acclaimed productions like Spike Lee's HBO documentary *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006), Jonathan Demme's *Right to Return* project (2007), or the more recent *Trouble the Water* (2008) by Carl Deal and Tia Lessin. While those films are comprised of a compilation or re-framing of other people's footage, the only borrowed images in *Kamp Katrina* are those seen on televisions in the background of places where Redmon and Sabin turned on their cameras, and in the dark spaces where they captured the emotional turmoil of their fellow campers. They were urban explorers, embedded in the encampment, documenting the struggle to survive in the wake of a disaster like dedicated cultural ethnographers. When the filmmakers depict (from the vantage point of the survivors) the attempts by Mayor C. Ray Nagin to close down such campsites, viewers can better understand the meaning of sacrifice and solidarity as neighbors are forced to help one another in spite of the leaders who let them down. But sometimes even the best intentions come up

In his review for *The Nation* (September 10th, 2007), Stuart Klawans calls *Kamp Katrina* an "urban platoon movie"; he describes the New Orleans seen in your film as "like a combat zone," and the events that transpire as a "war of attrition." What did you think when you first read this review? Does this description accurately reflect your perspective during the production—that is, did it feel at times like you were embedded journalists on the front lines of the Battle of New Orleans?

In a lot of ways Klawans' description of the film is accurate, insofar as looking at the final product of *Kamp Katrina*. However, day-to-day living in New Orleans did not seem to have the same chaos. Granted, the only grocery store that was open was in the French Quarter (about a mile away), and there were no restaurants open for a long time. Knowing that at the very least we could have three hot meals each day at Washington Square Park provided a lot of refuge and security. They also had nurses in case a medical problem occurred.

First and foremost, we were interested in telling a compelling story that an audience can follow with visual metaphors and poetry. We were not interested in simply reporting the facts, so we never saw ourselves as journalists. We wanted to capture what the

essence of living felt like for this one community in one very small area in the Upper 9th Ward of New Orleans. In no shape or form were we attempting to make an epic film about the overall experience of living in post-Katrina New Orleans. We captured one community and their daily events, and the way in which the lack of systemic structure compounded a lot of the problems individuals brought to the Kamp.

One of the most remarkable aspects of *Kamp Katrina* is the fact that the events it documents take place immediately on the heels of an earlier film, *Mardi Gras: Made in China* (2006). In fact, you offer a kind of preview of the upcoming “Alvar Street” project at the end of *Mardi Gras*. What was the transition like between the two projects? How much of an overlap was there in the process of wrapping up one film and working on the next?

There was a fluid overlap in terms of wrapping one story and starting another. We never really finish a story as we find elements that we continue to follow, similar to following a chain and merging connections between one story and the next one. Chance and openness have a lot to do with it. After *Mardi Gras: Made in China* (MGMIC) we began work on what is now our third documentary, *Intimidad*. We shot *Intimidad* on the U.S./Mexico border in Reynosa, Mexico. When we left Mexico and crossed into the U.S. we stopped at a hotel to check our email. We walked inside and noticed images of Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans on TV. We had four messages on our cell phone from Ms. Pearl who had evacuated to Oklahoma. She urged us to return to New Orleans to meet her as soon as possible. Three weeks after the storm we returned to her home in the Bywater and started filming in the same place where we had left off with MGMIC. Between MGMIC and *Kamp Katrina* we had continued filming Ms. Pearl in hopes of making a larger story. The continuation of filming after the storm made logical sense. We also distribute our own films and through the distribution of MGMIC, which we did while in Kamp Katrina, we were able to raise the funds slowly piece by piece for the production of *Kamp Katrina*.

Much of the action in *Kamp Katrina* is driven by Ms. Pearl acting as a catalyst in a variety of desperate, difficult situations. At the outset of the film she appears to merely “stumble” into the spotlight. Clearly you realized that you were documenting

something special, but how long did you expect it to last—that is, did you have a timeline or budget going into this project?

There is a technique called “bump and go” that Jeff Kreines and Joel DeMott coin in their amazing documentary film, *Seventeen* (1983). The process is following a person until they lead you to another event or person and continue down the chain. The story is then a series of events and people who are interwoven. We used *Seventeen* as an example of how to tell the story of Kamp Katrina, with Ms. Pearl as the connector. She attempted to take on the roles of nurse, social worker, grocery store, landlord, etc.—the system that was lost in New Orleans. She wanted to build her own city within the destruction of New Orleans. Of course this is an impossible duty to fulfill, but her mantra was “build the city up nail by nail and meal by meal.”

By beginning the story with the invitation and letting Ms. Pearl guide the audience to the setting we could then continue to return to her. Everyday we would question: How do we show a social structure that is normally invisible but very much a part of our daily existence, which has collapsed and is no longer there? Our solution was by keeping Ms. Pearl as the catalyst, and seeking a balance while following the personal stories of the people who chose to live in this backyard. As the story progresses the focus is more on Kelley and Doug, but we always return to Ms. Pearl because she provides an understanding of the stresses and consequences involved in creating the city known as Kamp Katrina. Our budget was based on the money we made from DIY screenings of *Mardi Gras: Made in China*.

Erik Barnouw describes various approaches to modern, non-fiction filmmaking according to the role of the documentarist as either an “observer,” a “catalyst,” or a “guerilla”? If your instigating, interrogative style of telling “a story of globalization gone wild” in *Mardi Gras* was more in line with the tactics of a guerilla filmmaker, how would you describe your role in presenting the story of Kamp Katrina?

We were participant observers in our approach to *Kamp Katrina*, by choosing to live in the same location that we were shooting and becoming as much a part of the community as the other members involved. Our role was multiple yet very specific because we were there to capture the events that unfolded over time. We lived in the house and sometimes David stayed in the tents. Day after day we

didn't know what would occur, but we constantly had our cameras with us. We lived as they lived, they lived as we lived, rarely making a separation between "us and them." In other words, we all lived together, but under very different financial and mental circumstances. The major difference between their situation and ours is that we had money to leave and a safe place to which we could return.

We also put a lot of rules on our filmmaking process. We did not ask questions about an individual's past and our goal was to exclude interviews. The people in *Kamp Katrina* were there because they found out about Ms. Pearl's backyard—we didn't invite anyone to stay there or cast for characters. We also restricted the time period of filming to Kelley's pregnancy, which was due just after Mardi Gras. We thought in the beginning that the birthing of her child would be a larger metaphor for the rebirth of New Orleans.

The presentation of our story was pretty much "wait and see what happens and record it as it unfolds." We hoped for the best, but didn't fully understand the worst moments. The events that led to the conclusion changed, of course, but we continued to follow our imposed rules with the exception of interviewing Kelley. A lot of the film felt like a series of interlocked serendipitous moments. We were guided by intuition and mainly because someone would yell, "Come film this!" Putting restrictions on the process forced a new creative process to emerge—one that felt organic and homemade.

One night, for example, everyone was sleeping on floors, in tents, and in limited beds when a man removed his shoes, climbed on top of Ms. Pearl's house, and peeped inside her window, directly into Ms. Pearl's face as she lay a few inches away. Suddenly, we heard Ms. Pearl scream, "I'm gonna get you!" as she ran down the stairs to find the man. David's first reaction was to immediately grab the camera and film her in the process of trying to find the man who was peeping in her window. A newly arrived resident was shocked that he was trying to film her chasing the man in her back yard and asked, "Why are you filming this?" David's immediate response was, "I film everything." With that said, several times we turned off the camera in order to intervene in some situations.

As participants and observers, what kinds of challenges did you face by including yourselves as subjects in the *Kamp Katrina* experiment?

There were benefits and setbacks to being so participatory. David is much more rational and has an easier time focusing on story, while Ashley tends to produce films in a very emotional way. Being so emotional and involved, it makes it difficult to edit a scene without bringing oneself back to that moment. So we hired a third editor for *Kamp Katrina*, Tim Messler. By having Tim around, we were able to see the “scene” or moment in a fresh or new way. If we chose not to be so participatory we may have been able to edit the story more as outsiders and retain some separation, but on the other hand we may have missed a lot.

The most common challenges included finding places to decompress, wondering when to stop filming, and being able to move on the fly often without eating. We didn’t have a vehicle so we traveled by foot and bicycle. Boredom was a constant cycle followed by moments of conflict and turbulent tension in *Kamp Katrina*. Mostly, the challenge was trying to reconcile the fact that we were making a film and telling a story about people who were slowly digressing into violent and harmful situations. We honestly didn’t expect such violence and abuse to occur. At one point we discussed the possibility of abandoning the project due to the negative behaviors that took over *Kamp Katrina*. We decided to continue filming in hopes that something positive would come out of the experiment and because we felt a sense of loyalty to completing the story that we started recording.

You encounter many fascinating “characters” throughout the film, and you witness many uneasy departures from *Kamp Katrina*. As hosts, Ms. Pearl and David Cross make the rules quite clear, but their guests come to find the rules very challenging:

- no getting drunk
- no hard drugs
- stay away from our friends across the street
- keep your tent and surrounding area clean
- no open food in tents
- no smoking or cooking in tents
- take out your own trash

And then there was this warning: “Don’t think you’re immune to this devastation, and the occasional smell of the dead will affect you in some way. Many have fallen prey to drugs and alcohol. This is a new experience for us all; suggestions, comments, and ideas needed.” What were your thoughts after reading this welcome letter from your hosts?

To us, the rules were very important to the community. Initially, we thought Ms. Pearl and David Cross were imposing common sense and wondered why they had created such a specific list of rules. We didn't understand the extent of the social and personal problems in the Upper 9th Ward of New Orleans. Clearly, we were naïve, dismissive, and wrong. We didn't think people would use drugs and felt an immediate sense of confusion to what eventually became a harbinger for *Kamp Katrina*. In hindsight, Ms. Pearl and David Cross were absolutely correct in their knowledge and we should've respected their disciplinary rules more so than we did. We participated in the community, but also tried to remain on the periphery. The possibility of us getting evicted was always there.

In the film we wanted to show that David Cross and Ms. Pearl had in fact made rules and expected community members to abide by them. A lot of the rules had to do with the safety and well-being of the *Kamp*. In Q&A sessions we are often asked why Ms. Pearl and David Cross didn't stick to the rules. Although the film lays out the rules clearly and shows who breaks them, in real life things were much more complicated and confusing. Ms. Pearl and David Cross were in a position where they had to make decisions very quickly and they did not know if someone was lying to stay at the *Kamp* or telling the truth, which made it very difficult for them to enforce the rules and they made a lot of exceptions.

A concrete example is the "Tiffany cat lamp" scene. A few days prior to Tammy's eviction, we had filmed Tammy in her tent proudly showing off the cat lamp. I don't believe she made any attempt to steal the lamp. In the heat of the moment David Cross and Ms. Pearl chose to enforce a rule based on Kelley's claim that she had not given the lamp to Tammy and Mike. Similarly, Kelley was in a hard spot because if she had really given the lamp to Tammy and Mike, she could have been evicted. Ms. Pearl and David Cross are very giving people but like everyone else in the *Kamp*, including us, flawed. This is what led to a very complex community. The decisions people made were not always rational but sometimes emotional.

In the liner notes for the *Kamp Katrina* DVD you cite scholar Jeff Ferrell, who defines cultural criminology as "an approach that examines crime and deviance ... through the lens of meaning, emotion, and media"; and carnival as "a cacophony of seductive contradictions, a grotesquely beautiful bit of organized chaos that both unleashes and ritualizes the odder of human impulses." How do these concepts apply to the film? How does the intersection of

criminology and ethnography relate to other works produced and distributed by Carnavalesque Films?

David's background is sociology—cultural studies and ethnography that uses visual/audio records to show and tell stories. Cultural criminology acknowledges that notions of seduction, pleasure, and punishment are motivations for action—criminal and legal. Cultural criminology is a thoughtful and careful analysis of how transgression becomes part of social organizations and groups, and the roles that media, emotion, and disruption play in the criminalization of everyday routines. Ashley comes from a background of art history and understands the process of documentation as an aesthetic choice.

Our goal is to transform this sociological and analytical understanding into a story, and every film we've made contains elements of "carnival"; that is, celebration, irrational activities, subtle critiques, and inversion and excess in grotesque and pleasurable ways. It is an appropriate framework for understanding behavior in poetic and literary ways. After all, our company is called Carnavalesque Films and our purpose, as stated on our web page, is to bring together stories united by a raw, startling sensibility of disruption and celebration, where excess and transgression percolate in everyday life.

Cultural criminology might assist in understanding how the federal government criminalized the citizens of New Orleans. If the cameras immediately before, during, and after Katrina documented a crime in progress, then *Kamp Katrina* takes you inside the scene to see people who reside there, absent the enforcement of laws or a functioning infrastructure. We see residents move into Kamp Katrina with bright eyes and big smiles, excited to regenerate their lives, yet they live amidst destruction and end up participating in several illegal acts. They are victims and perpetrators, oppressors and oppressed—and we are witnessing their actions.

The point, for us at least, isn't to condemn every criminal act, but to understand how certain criminal actions are initially seductive for the doer (agent) yet simultaneously harmful in their consequences; how these behaviors exist inside larger structural and cultural conditions that perhaps incite crime. Ms. Pearl's homemade libertarian form of governance failed. Would Kamp Katrina have survived with the local government's assistance? What would've happened if nurses, doctors, and counselors were paid to assist in Kamp Katrina? We are left to speculate.

Many “scenes of horror” that occur in this film happen spontaneously, seeming at times to develop even before the camera is turned on and recording. What ethical principles guided you through dilemmas of domestic violence or other acts of criminal behavior? Were there any circumstances in which you felt compelled to turn the camera off?

Kamp Katrina opens up a dialogue about ethics and filmmaking. Ms. Pearl was and is extremely aware of media representation and was very sensitive to the fact that by including these really dark moments in the film, she was concerned it would portray “New Orleans” in a certain way. We had many conversations with her where we would explain that we were not in any way attempting to show “the New Orleans experience” and that the dark moments are important because they speak more about the lack of aid and illustrates the hellish side of living in a tent with little privacy and security.

What is seen in the final cut makes it appear that we were not part of the community. In a lot of ways this was a deceptive stylistic choice. We were very much a part of what happened in the backyard and had many conversations with people off camera. As a result of these conversations, and because we were living there, people in the backyard opened up and trusted us.

Our overarching rules are Do No Harm and Don’t Humiliate the Subject. However, humiliation can be a tactic to prevent violence from happening. For instance, we knew Doug abused Kelley so we often had our cameras with us when he and Kelley were together. We knew that our cameras would prevent him from abusing her (verbally and physically) given that he would’ve been humiliated if we had filmed him trying to abuse her. However, we also talked to Kelley several times about the abuse and called the police on Doug twice. Kelley recommended that we film the abuse to show the police. The police told us that domestic violence after Katrina had escalated and that they were dealing with a number of calls. When we showed the police our footage, they dismissed it as a private matter and mockingly said, “That’s what happens when you live in the Garden of Eden.”

We almost never turned off the camera in the middle of violent situations, unless the camera contributed to it. One exception that’s not in the film is when Doug and Kelley got into a fight at a local bar. David immediately started filming the fight as other patrons stormed after Doug and threw him into the street. The bar patrons weren’t happy that David was filming so they almost threw him out, too.

One of the most exhilarating sequences in the film is the first post-Katrina celebration of Mardi Gras. What do you recall about the emotional state of the New Orleans community in those days?

Newspapers and television reported the controversy about whether New Orleans should celebrate Mardi Gras and invite out of town guests during such tragic times. One common response was that Mardi Gras is a temporary moment to set aside worries and problems; it's a collective ritual to celebrate and regain strength as well as dignify those who passed on—to dance in their honor. Others said celebrating Mardi Gras was an insult to those who couldn't be present and that spending millions of dollars to host a party was downright irresponsible, especially when citizens couldn't even afford to care for themselves and even more so given that the city wasn't directly assisting the efforts to rebuild. "Put the money in rebuilding instead of partying," they said.

We understood both responses (and more), but didn't take sides. Obviously the residents needed a collective release, but they also needed economic assistance to rebuild their homes and lives. Mardi Gras, in a way, provided a playful place to regenerate, heal, and honor those who were left behind, and also a political space to exert their anger and grief using humor, diatribes, and satire. Mardi Gras didn't provide direct financial packages to rebuild but it did open up an imaginative space in which to intermix.

There is a scene in which Ms. Pearl and David Cross are watching a local television news report. How did interactivity with other media (e.g., television, internet, mobile phones) impact the production and your subjects' awareness of their situation?

The cell phones seen in *Kamp Katrina* were our phones and the residents sometimes used them. The internet was absent, but it sometimes worked in one French Quarter coffee shop next to Washington Park that became our space of refuge when we needed to decompress. Otherwise, no one in *Kamp Katrina* had access to media, except Ms. Pearl and David who watched discouraging news reports. Overall, the news reports saddened Ms. Pearl and David and made them feel more and more helpless. Eventually, they stopped watching the news.

Have you seen other documentaries about Hurricane Katrina? What are your thoughts about seeing these films in light of your experiences making *Kamp Katrina*?

We have seen at least eight other documentaries about Hurricane Katrina. Our biggest problem with those films is that they use the storm as an emotional arc. To us what is more interesting is telling a story that is not clichéd and makes you look at an event in a way the news isn't reporting. We were in New Orleans when Spike Lee was there and we eventually filmed him making his film at one point. To be frank, he was a jerk and continuously told us to leave "his streets." He had several cameras, fifteen or more people working for him. He stayed in hotels in the French Quarter and based his entire film on interviews, reconstructions, and archival footage. It's an excellent film—perhaps the best of all Katrina-related films we've seen.

Most films we have seen about Katrina are pretty straightforward and also extremely politically correct. We have been criticized a few times that the only African Americans we show in our film are the drug dealers across the street. Our response to this is that we did not cast for the film. There was one African American that lived in the Kamp but he was not comfortable with us filming until later on and it was too late to start his story at that point. It is unfortunate too because he was one of the few people in the backyard that actually left and got an apartment after saving money from working. As for the neighbors across the street, it did not matter what color their skin was. Through one shot of the neighbors we were trying to illustrate how close the temptation for drugs was. It's a blurry shot on purpose because we wanted to conceal their identities. With many documentaries there is a politically and socially correct way of telling the story and with *Kamp Katrina* we really stuck to a truth that would challenge viewers depending on what their backgrounds are and where they come from.

To your knowledge, how many people featured in the film have had the opportunity to see it? What are their reactions?

Ms. Pearl, David Cross, a lot of people from Washington Square Park, Charles, and Kelley have seen the film. Each person has a different reaction. Ms. Pearl has had the most conflicted response. In many ways Ms. Pearl refuses to remember the difficult dark moments and would rather focus on the brighter moments. She understands the choices we made in the editing room but disagrees with putting

certain moments in the movie. Kelley of course had a very emotional reaction to the film. After David showed her the final cut she was very quiet and went home. The next day she said she cried all night remembering that time in her life. She told us that if she ever had a desire to use drugs again, that all she had to do was recall *Kamp Katrina* to eliminate that desire.

It's been over four years since that September day in Washington Square Park. How recent was your last return visit to New Orleans?

We've returned to New Orleans several times since making *Kamp Katrina* (maybe 10 or 15 times). Our last trip to New Orleans was to screen the film at the University of New Orleans on February 23rd, 2009.

It's been even longer since you first took your cameras into a bead factory in China. Has your focus on political issues and geographical interests remained local since *Kamp Katrina*, or do any of your current or future projects address global issues?

We are currently editing a film titled "Noah's Arc," which is also suitable for cultural criminology. In this film we show the process of how U.S. and Russian scouts team up to scour Siberian landscapes and small towns to recruit and transport hundreds of teenage girls to Tokyo, Japan, in hopes of transforming them into models. The goals of the scouts – from their point of view—are to "save girls" and "give them a chance to become women." "Noah's Arc" is shown from the scouts' perspective, as well as the girls' points-of-view while in Tokyo. "Noah's Arc" is perhaps our most challenging, ambitious, and costly project to date. Another film set in Tokyo shows the making of a new genre of legal child porn in Tokyo: the government officials who legalize it, the people who make it, the director who films it, those who sell it, and men who buy it.

Kamp Katrina (2007), 75 minutes

<http://www.carnivalesquefilms.com/Kamp-Katrina.html>

Directed by Ashley Sabin and David Redmon

Photography by Redmon and Sabin

Edited by Tim Messler, Sabin and Redmon

Music by Eric Taxier

Produced by Deborah Smith and Dale Smith

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Encrypting Katrina: Traumatic Inscription and the Architecture of Amnesia

Lindsay Tuggle

THE KATRINA MEMORIAL: ENCLOSING THE DEAD IN THE EYE OF THE STORM

On August 29th, 2008 the remaining unidentified and unclaimed victims of Hurricane Katrina were interred in mausoleums at the dedication of the New Orleans Katrina Memorial. In his commemorative address, Mayor C. Ray Nagin described the interment as signifying the enclosure of “the final bodies from Katrina, the last unknown victims. [It] represents the pain and suffering.”¹ As a vehicle for the containment of these “final bodies,” the Katrina Memorial inhabits politically and historically haunted ground. The monument ironically occupies a pre-existing burial site for the anonymous dead, while appropriating the form of the hurricane as its architectural structure. Dislocating the historic Charity Hospital Cemetery, it houses the unknown and abandoned casualties of a disaster that is as much governmental as environmental. These bodies, ignored by governments and bystanders alike, were simultaneously consumed by media spectators of the disaster’s aftermath—trauma by proxy. Figuring the site as an incorporative attempt to contain the trauma of Katrina, conceptual designer Jeffrey Rouse explains that the memorial “*incorporates* both the curves of the Hurricane and the meditative quality of a labyrinth.”² The memorial evolved from a committee initiated by New Orleans coroner Frank Minyard, which included Rouse, a psychiatrist with the coroner’s office who had the initial “vision” for the design. Rouse envisaged a “curving, concentric form that draws visitors toward its center, like a labyrinth for meditative walks.”³ Minyard established a charity to solicit funding for the

¹ Laura Maggi, “Katrina Dead Interred at New Memorial,” *New Orleans Metro Real Time News* (August 29, 2008), <http://www.nola.com>, (Accessed September 2008).

² *New Orleans Katrina Memorial*, http://www.neworleanscoroner.org/katrina_memorial.html, (Accessed July 2009, emphasis mine).

³ Doug MacCash, “New Orleans Katrina Memorial is Almost Perfect,” *The Times – Picayune* (September 14, 2007),

memorial, which raised over one million dollars toward construction and maintenance costs.⁴ The plans were entrusted to Matthews International, a corporate “memorialization” company that has constructed thematic monuments for an oddly diverse range of entities, including the Atlanta Olympics, 9/11 firefighters, and Elvis Presley. Under the direction of Corporate Vice President Dave DeCarlo, a design team headed by Chris Kroll developed the architectural rendering of Rouse’s hurricane-labyrinth (see Figure 1).⁵ Despite its meditative intentions, the structure implicitly memorializes entrapment, recalling the failed evacuation that followed the storm’s landfall. The memorial’s spiral pathways draw visitors inward, toward the metaphorical “eye” of the storm, symbolized by a marble plaque adjacent to the mausoleums.⁶

http://blog.nola.com/dougmaccash/2007/09/new_orleans_katrina_memorial.html, (Accessed September 2008).

⁴ New Orleans Katrina Memorial Proposal,

http://www.neworleanscoroner.org/katrina_memorial.html, (Accessed September 2007).

⁵ New Orleans Katrina Memorial Proposal.

⁶ No demographic data on the memorial’s visitors currently exists. Likewise, no scholarly research has yet examined the memorial, either from an architectural or psychoanalytic approach. I am currently seeking research funding that would enable me to interview residents and Katrina survivors regarding the memorial’s design and location at Charity Hospital Cemetery on Canal Street.



Figure 1. Artist's rendering of Katrina Memorial. © Matthews International. Reproduced with permission.

The labyrinthine design concretizes the aftermath of Katrina, invoking the inaccessibility of relief that resulted in hundreds of post-hurricane deaths.⁷ While numerous casualties drowned, many more died from exposure during the immediate aftermath, and over the following months from the physical stress of evacuation.⁸ The figuration of memorial as maze participates in the architectural containment of the dead. Their enclosure within the labyrinth's eye recalls post-Katrina containment strategies employed by federal and local law enforcement officials, aimed at preventing survivors from

⁷ According to Frank Minyard, Coroner of Orleans Parish, who performed autopsies on approximately one thousand Katrina fatalities, the "number one killer with Katrina was not drowning, it was not accidental falls, it was the exacerbation . . . of a heart condition, or a liver condition, or a brain condition . . . Any kind of a disease that a person had was made worse" by the traumatic stress of the storm's aftermath. Federal Emergency Management Agency Interview with Minyard, http://www.neworleanscoroner.org/katrina_memorial.html, (Accessed February 2010).

⁸ "Sign of Katrina Fatigue? Memorial Delayed," *The Associated Press* (July 13, 2008), <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/25655773/>, (Accessed August 2008).

“unlawfully” evacuating New Orleans.⁹ On September 1st, 2005, Police Chief Arthur Lawson ordered his deputies to barricade the Crescent City Connection, a three-mile bridge that spans the Mississippi River between New Orleans and the neighboring town of Gretna in Jefferson Parish. The bridge represented one of the few remaining outlets for escaping the devastation of New Orleans. As hundreds of survivors (including children, the elderly, and the disabled) attempted to cross the bridge, they were met by armed police who fired warning shots over their heads. The blockade prompted accusations of racial prejudice; the small town of Gretna is largely white, while the demographic of survivors fleeing New Orleans was predominantly African American.¹⁰ The legacy of sequestration surrounding New Orleans long predates Hurricane Katrina. In 1987, officials erected a barrier to prohibit New Orleans residents from entering Jefferson Parish. The concrete blockades were known as “The Berlin Wall” by New Orleans locals. The barricades created traffic gridlock and prevented ambulances and fire trucks from accessing homes and hospitals efficiently. Three months prior to their construction, the Jefferson Parish Sheriff’s Office mandated deputies to interrogate black drivers in white neighborhoods without probable cause. New Orleans Mayor Sidney Barthelmy, who declared, “Jefferson Parish cannot lock my people in”, eventually bulldozed the barricades.¹¹

One of the most violent examples of post-Katrina “law enforcement” is the Danziger Bridge shooting, which claimed the lives of James Brissette and Ronald Madison; four others were wounded.¹² On September 4th, 2005, New Orleans police opened fire on a group of unarmed African American civilians attempting to cross the Danziger Bridge in search of supplies. The officers claimed to be responding to a shooting reported in the area. Federal prosecutors initially focused on the police conspiracy to cover up the events surrounding the shooting. The investigation deepened in April 2010, when former New Orleans Police Officer Michael Hunter

⁹ See Michael P. Bibler’s “Always the Tragic Jezebel: New Orleans, Katrina, and the Layered Discourse of a Doomed Southern City,” *Southern Cultures* 14.2, 6-27. See also Billy Southern, *Down in New Orleans: Reflections on a Drowned City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 128-132.

¹⁰ John Burnett, “Evacuees Were Turned Away at Gretna,” *NPR*, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4855611>, (Accessed October 2010).

¹¹ Southern, 63.

¹² Laura Maggi and Brendan McCarthy, “Danziger Bridge shooting plea, second in case, provides new cover up details,” *The Times Picayune* (March 11, 2010), http://www.nola.com/crime/index.ssf/2010/03/danziger_bridge_shooting_plea_1.html, (Accessed April 2010).

told a federal judge that he witnessed fellow officers shoot unarmed civilians without provocation. His testimony alleged that Sergeant Kenneth Bowen, one of seven officers charged in the case, shot civilians with a military assault rifle and continued firing after the victims were wounded and immobile. He also claimed to have witnessed Officer Robert Faulcon shoot Ronald Madison, who was mentally handicapped, in the back as Madison fled the scene. Most gruesome of all Hunter's testimony was his allegation that Bowen "kicked and stomped" Ronald Madison as he lay dying on the Danziger Bridge. According to court documents, Hunter told federal prosecutors that a supervisor ordered police officers to bury the evidence, "because we don't want this to look like a massacre."¹³



Figure 2. The Katrina Memorial. April 2010. Photograph by the author.

¹³ Laura Maggi and Brendan McCarthy, "Judge in Danziger case sickened by 'raw brutality of the shooting and craven lawlessness of the cover-up,'" *The Times Picayune Online* (April 7, 2010), http://www.nola.com/crime/index.ssf/2010/04/judge_sickened_by_raw_brutalit.html, (Accessed May 2010).

The Katrina Memorial enacts a similar (albeit posthumous) containment function. The location of the mausoleums within the center of the labyrinth ensures that, while visitors may be able to find their way out again, Katrina's ghosts will not. The memorial houses the casualties not only of a disaster but also of a diaspora. The inscription on the marble tablet marking the center of the labyrinthine hurricane attests to the diasporic traumas of the bodies it contains: "Most of the deceased were identified and buried by loved ones in private ceremonies throughout the nation. Here lie the remaining. The unclaimed and unidentified victims of the storm from the New Orleans area. Some have been forgotten. Some remain unknown." As further evidence of the failure of recovery efforts, many families of the Katrina diaspora lacked the means to return to, and bury, their dead. The seemingly permanent uprooting of many Katrina survivors has made the reclamation of remains practically impossible. Julia Powers, the FEMA Forensic Anthropologist assigned to assist Minyard, explained: "some families have chosen not to claim the bodies; some we cannot find families for."¹⁴ The implication that families scattered by the chaotic (and belated) evacuation "choose" not to claim their dead perpetuates the flawed logic that pervaded many aspects of Katrina recovery, which presumes that residents chose to stay and that they now choose not to return.

By virtue of its geographic isolation and relative inaccessibility, the memorial seeks to repress the unfound bodies that resist its enclosure. Situated at the far end of Canal Street, bordered by the Jewish and Firemen's Cemeteries, the Katrina Memorial is estranged from typical New Orleans tourist destinations in the French Quarter and Garden District. The site is similarly distanced from the devastated lower wards and the spectacle of their ravaged homes. Embedding the "forgotten" and "unknown" remains of Katrina decedents within the eye of an architecturally inscribed hurricane serves to effectively quarantine them. The space for mourning these unknown casualties is consigned to a specified, bordered location on the outskirts of town. The memorial itself seems to have already been forgotten. My visit, at noon on a Tuesday in April, found the grounds chained and padlocked, prohibiting entry. The site was entirely silent, devoid of visitors or even pedestrian street traffic. Cloistered behind imposing wrought-iron gates, the only remaining

¹⁴ "Sign of Katrina Fatigue? Memorial Delayed."

relics of Charity Hospital Cemetery, the memorial enacts the containment of the dead and the exclusion of the living (Figure 3).



Figure 3: The Katrina Memorial. April 2010. Photograph by the author. The gates are all that remain of this section of the original Charity Hospital Cemetery.

Within the context of contemporary American culture, many large-scale memorialization projects invite collective repression and historical revision through a process Marita Sturken has termed “architectural reenactment,” which reconstructs aspects of trauma within structural design.¹⁵ The Katrina Memorial utilizes strategies of reenactment to produce a form of cultural amnesia. It inscribes the hurricane into the cultural landscape, evoking a form of repetition that does not seek to remember those lost, but to repress their memory through immersion in the scale of the event, rather than the loss itself. This nostalgia for the event (evident through the

¹⁵ Marita Sturken, *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero* (Durham: Duke UP, 2007), 9. Sturken’s use of this term is in relation to the Ground Zero Memorial, “Reflecting Absence.”

recreation of formal aspects of the trauma within the memorial structure) is a pathological response that constitutes, in Jacques Derrida's words, "the madness of an amnesiac fidelity, of a forgetful hypermnesia."¹⁶ The Katrina Memorial functions as a site of amnesiac projection that attempts to infinitely and permanently duplicate the event so that the psyche does not have to. This architectural repetition compulsion seeks to obliterate the specificity of loss, by virtue of its obsession with scale and with quantifying and containing the dead. Their bodies are embedded within memorials that perform hyper-national functions of historical reclamation and revision.

Hurricane Katrina catalyzed a nationally-televised disaster centered on generational, racial inequity. The spectacle of Katrina broadcast, all too briefly, the faces of those who remain fundamentally forgotten and invisible in our political and cultural landscape. In the wake of their exposure, dominant cultural mechanisms of erasure and amnesia, including memorialization strategies of containment and enclosure, were invoked to return these citizens to their designated peripheral spaces. And yet, as Freud insists, the repressed have infinite and fantastic methods of resurrection.¹⁷ Their legacy remains inscribed in search and rescue graffiti scrawled not only on abandoned houses. These strange, hieroglyphic markings are preserved as memorials on many homes otherwise restored to their original grandeur. They stand as statements of silent resilience, insisting that Katrina's ghosts remain defiantly in the face of the nation that left them behind.

In contrast to this localized aesthetic of preservation as a celebration of survival, the Katrina Memorial engages in an architectural whitewashing of the generational history of poverty in New Orleans. Simon Stow argues that the Bush administration's response to Hurricane Katrina, particularly the President's flawed public invocation of the "second line" tradition in jazz funerals, recalls Greek conceptions of democratic forgetting and ritualized mourning practices as devices for containing elements of civil unrest and "problematic remembering."¹⁸ Chief among these amnesiac devices was "whitewashing," the recovering, for the purposes of revision, the surface of an official tablet bearing condemnations or

¹⁶ Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 66.

¹⁷ Sigmund Freud, "Psychoanalytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia," 1911, trans A. Strachey and J. Strachey, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 12, ed. J. Strachey, (London: Hogarth, 1958), 67-68.

¹⁸ Simon Stow, "Do You Know What it Means to Miss New Orleans? George Bush, the Jazz Funeral, and the Politics of Memory," *Theory and Event* 12.2 (2009), 6.

grievances deemed threatening to the *polis*. According to Stow, whitewashing constituted “a process that captured the way in which, for the Greeks, to erase meant to destroy by additional covering.”¹⁹ The Katrina Memorial juxtaposes whitewashing techniques of revision with psychoanalytic strategies of traumatic “flooding” to induce a collective dissociative experience in visitors—an experience that, in its fixation on the horrific grandeur of trauma, forgets to remember.



Figure 4. This search and rescue code is preserved on a Garden District home. Photograph by the author.

¹⁹ Stow, 16.

The Katrina Memorial operates on the geographic periphery of the disaster tourism narrative prevalent in post-Katrina New Orleans. Katrina tourism targets disaster consumers similar to those Sturken terms “tourists of history”: passive subjects who locate their historical/political status via their relationship to “consumerism, media images, souvenirs, popular culture, and museum and architectural reenactments . . . a form of tourism that has as its goal a cathartic ‘experience’ of history.”²⁰ As Anna Hartnell has demonstrated, the aftermath of Katrina shifted New Orleans tourist destinations to include the damaged lower wards, but the underlying mechanism of amnesiac appropriation is an acceleration of “pre-Katrina trends”: “Like the commodification of black New Orleans that arguably formed the centerpiece of the city’s tourist industry before the storm, Katrina tourism can be read as a process of forgetting.”²¹ As participants in this narrative of historical consumption, “disaster tourists” board the “Katrina bus,” a vehicle for voyeuristic exploration of the storm-ravaged lower wards. Upon the tour’s conclusion, visitors are returned to the relatively pristine French Quarter, unscathed by disturbing interactions with survivors of the storm and its aftermath who are, in most cases, eerily absent.²² The Katrina Memorial functions as an integral yet inaccessible extension of this disaster tourism narrative: beyond a visual survey of the hurricane’s aftermath, the memorial is shaped as the virtual *experience* of disaster. Its problematic remains are effectively contained within a burial ground historically assigned to the unknown dead on the city’s outer fringes.

The Katrina Memorial offers a compelling example of the architecture of traumatic inscription as a failure of incorporative mourning, recalling Freud’s assertion that melancholia “behaves like an open wound” that seeks to fill itself entirely with absence.²³ For Freud, melancholic incorporation constituted a failure to mourn. Rather than productively “working through” loss, the subject absorbs the loss itself, creating an intrinsic homage to trauma that lives within the survivor. Melancholia then incorporates the lost object, establishing a permanent attachment to loss within the subject. Derrida speaks more favorably of this melancholic refusal when he

²⁰ Sturken, 9.

²¹ Anna Hartnell, “Katrina Tourism and a Tale of Two Cities: Visualizing Race and Class in New Orleans,” *American Quarterly* 61.3 (2009), 724.

²² Hartnell, 723-725.

²³ See Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” *On Metapsychology*, ed. Angela Richards (New York: Penguin, 1991), 262.

theorizes the ethical impossibility and infinity of mourning. For Derrida, in order to remain faithful to the alterity of the absent other, interiorization must remain both impossible and incomplete. This “unbearable paradox of fidelity” results from “another organization of space and of visibility, of the gazing and the gazed upon.”²⁴ In Derrida’s understanding, the necessary failure of interiorization is related not to the limits of a specific *enclosure*, but rather to the drastic revision of “space and visibility”: “a geometry of gazes” that reduces the dead to a series of “images.”²⁵ In keeping with Freud’s theory of rapaciously consumptive melancholia, Maria Torok and Nicholas Abraham’s conception of “incorporation” also constitutes a failure to mourn successfully. For Abraham and Torok, “internalization,” the primary supportive mechanism behind mourning processes, is broken into two subsets: “introjection,” the process of symbolically absorbing the other in normative or “successful” mourning, and “incorporation,” the fantastic wound of melancholia in which the totality of the loss remains unrealizable and the other is encrypted within the psyche.²⁶ The Katrina Memorial enacts a form of *failed* incorporation, establishing a site of perpetual detachment in which the other is permanently encrypted *without*, that is, *outside* of, the subject. The “foreign body” is not “lodged within the subject,” but enclosed forever in its foreignness, entirely other but also entirely inaccessible.²⁷ Rather than a dismissal of the full significance of the loss, failed incorporation in this instance takes the form of hyper-memorialization—a bizarre fixation on the event itself, rather than the lost object. As Lawrence Johnson explains, “incorporation produces the gap in the psyche which Abraham and Torok have called the crypt, a place where the lost object is to be *kept alive* within the ego.”²⁸ I propose that failed incorporation, in this instance, produces a place outside the subject where the lost object is *kept dead*, and externalized.

This external encryption is heightened by the memorial’s problematic interment of Katrina decedents in the place of an existing cemetery, necessitating the disruption (and at times removal) of the

²⁴ Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, ed. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 2001), 159.

²⁵ Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, 159.

²⁶ See Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, “Mourning or Melancholia: Introjection *versus* Incorporation” in *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, ed. and trans. Nicholas T. Rand (Chicago: UP of Chicago, 1994), 125-139.

²⁷ Abraham and Torok, 174.

²⁸ Johnson, Lawrence, “Tracing Calculation [*Calque Calcul*] Between Nicolas Abraham and Jacques Derrida,” *PMC* 10.3 (2000), 2.

bodies already housed there. The site is located on land donated by Louisiana State University, which originally housed the Charity Hospital Cemetery, a repository for the remains of centuries of New Orleans' poorest citizens in unmarked graves. During topsoil removal and land clearing, human bone fragments were unearthed, cataloged, and relocated by onsite archeologists.²⁹ The placement of the Katrina Memorial, which commemorates those who died as a result of large-scale governmental failure and neglect, on the site of a charity cemetery enacts an uncanny symmetry. The displacement of the Charity Hospital dead to create space for the memorial strangely mirrors the Katrina diaspora, and continues to categorize the dead into those who are worthy or unworthy of memorialization. The site enacts an architectural whitewashing, erasing the buried history of racial injustice in New Orleans to memorialize a so-called natural disaster. The Katrina Memorial inscribes the image of a hurricane on top of centuries of unmarked graves, paving over the anonymous burial ground of poverty with a monument to disaster.

Traces of unburied anxiety resonate at sites of traumatic rupture, which exceed the absorptive capacity of the mind and the earth. At the Katrina Memorial, the absent presence of the unknown dead is contained within an architecture of (en)closure. The memorial attempts to localize the process of mourning. Its gates and fences impose finite boundaries upon the traumas endured by the bodies encrypted within the structure. Through its insistence on exteriority and finality, this architecture of (en)closure constitutes a failure of incorporative mourning. According to Abraham and Torok, instances of failed mourning generate linguistic barriers to representation known as crypts, in which the ego incorporates object-loss. The cryptophoric subject is rendered mute in relation to this loss: to speak of it would destroy the illusion of integration. For the crypt-bearer, to utter any word that alludes to the loss would be a catastrophic acknowledgement that the object is not alive within, but dead, without. Conversely, the Katrina Memorial, as a monument of failed incorporation, permanently inscribes the traumatic event *into* the cultural landscape, keeping the dead externalized. Yet this process of encryption is neither final nor failsafe. As Johnson argues, the telling silences that orbit crypts eventually betray their existence through "cryptonymic secretions":

²⁹ "Sign of Katrina Fatigue? Memorial Delayed." While there has been no academic analysis of the memorial construction to date, the dislocation of the Charity Hospital graves has been significantly under-reported in press coverage of the memorial.

The crypt operates . . . like a blind spot within the ego, filtering away any words, phrases, representations, or actions that might give away the secret locked in the crypt. . . . [T]he term ‘secretion’ refers both to the process of concealment and to the separation and excretion of internal matter. The crypt continually gives itself away by being conspicuous in failing to provide any evidence of its existence. It secretes itself in an enclave that refuses to admit to an exterior realm, yet its blockages produce a language that manifests on the surface, thereby revealing to the outside world the gaps that inhere within.³⁰

The memorial seeks to externally encrypt the unknown casualties of Katrina; it insists on the finality of their containment. The architectural inscription of the hurricane and enclosure of the site behind spiked metal fencing attests to the structural desire to barricade the hurricane and its casualties. The Charity Hospital gates allude to the encrypted secrets of the unclaimed and unknown bodies contained within, and the legacy of their abandonment.

The engraving of a symbolic representation of the traumatic event upon the landscape invites correlations with conceptions of “flooding” in trauma theory and psychotherapeutic practice. Rouse, the memorial’s conceptual designer, is a practicing psychiatrist—it is therefore possible that elements of psychoanalytic theory may have influenced the structural design. As a symptom of post-traumatic stress, flooding is reminiscent of the seepage associated with Johnson’s understanding of “cryptonymic secretions.”³¹ When a traumatic event has not been effectively processed by the psyche, remnants of the trauma may unexpectedly “leak” or “flood” from spaces of (unsuccessful) psychological containment. “Emotional flooding of trauma survivors involves expressive leakage of minimally processed affective experience. Because trauma-related feelings are intense, they tend to leak out in ways that survivors experience as unintended, unpredictable, or incomprehensible.”³²

³⁰ “Cryptonymic Secretions: On the Kindness of Strangers,” *Mourning and its Hospitalities / after . . .* Unpublished forthcoming collection, cited with author’s permission.

³¹ Lawrence Johnson, “Cryptonymic Secretions: On the Kindness of Strangers,” *Mourning and its Hospitalities / after . . .* Unpublished forthcoming collection, cited with author’s permission.

³² Eileen Kennedy-Moore and Jeanne C. Watson, *Expressing Emotion: Myths, Realities, and Therapeutic Strategies* (New York Guilford Press, 1999), 241.

Conversely, the term “flooding” has also been used in the treatment of phobias and anxiety. Direct therapeutic exposure, also known as flooding, is defined as “repeated or extended exposure, either in reality or in fantasy, to objectively harmless, but feared, stimuli for the purpose of reducing negative affect.”³³ Flooding strategies have at times been negatively associated with more extreme forms of implosive therapy, which engages frightening psychodynamic cues in an effort to enhance anxiety arousal, intended to foster “rapid extinction” of the phobia. Research has indicated that such “implosive” triggers are not only “ineffective” but also, in many instances, “contra-therapeutic” and re-traumatizing.³⁴ The wounding effects of triggering traumatic memories recall Freudian notions of the cyclical return of repression, which manifests in the tendency of many traumatized individuals to seek “compulsive re-exposure . . . to situations reminiscent of the trauma.”³⁵ While Freud suggested that the goal of repetition is to “gain mastery” over the trauma, clinical experience shows that repetition often causes further suffering.³⁶ The reclamation of the formal structure of the traumatic event for the purposes of memorialization sits firmly within the realms of a repetition compulsion. While visitors wander toward the eye of the hurricane, and the tombs it parallels, the structure recalls the entrapment of the storm’s aftermath. This architectural flooding strategy is aimed not at alleviating suffering in survivors, but at cultivating historical forgetting in disaster tourists and virtual witnesses by virtue of an inscription of the event so traumatically provocative that it forgets to remember anything other than itself.

Within the framework of post-traumatic aftermath, as Cathy Caruth explains, “to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or an event.”³⁷ In the space of hyper-memorialization, the act of mourning is eclipsed by the spectacle of the event. This possessive preference for the event en masse subverts bereavement processes by virtue of its incessant fascination with the reenactment of trauma. Through architectural preservation and cultivation of traumatic repetition, the Katrina Memorial ensures that participants remain

³³ Patrick A. Boudewyns and Robert H. Shipley, *Flooding and Implosive Therapy: Direct Therapeutic Exposure in Clinical Practice* (New York: Plenum Press, 1983), 3.

³⁴ Larry Michelson, “Flooding,” *Dictionary of Behaviour Therapy Techniques*, eds. Alan S. Bellack and Michel Hersen (New York: Pergamon Press, 1985), 130.

³⁵ Bessel A. van der Kolk, Alexander C. McFarlane, and Lars Weisaeth. *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society* (New York: Guilford Press, 1996), 493.

³⁶ van der Kolk et al., 493.

³⁷ Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 4.

situated not in an ongoing grief process, but in an infinitely replicated traumatic event. In this instance, memorial culture remains fixed within the repetition compulsion; the memorial is designed to produce and invite new reverberations as visitors arrive and depart. Speaking of post-traumatic hallucinations or flashes, Caruth argues against defining traumatic aftermath purely through links with the event:

The pathology cannot be defined either by the event itself . . . nor can it be defined in terms of a distortion of the event, achieving its haunting power as a result of distorting personal significances attached to it. The pathology consists, rather, solely in the structure of its experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it.³⁸

In terms of an evocative pathological response, the memorial figuration of trauma hinges on a “distortion of the event” rather than the “personal significances” attached to it. Through inscription and narration, the memorial speaks with a singular voice, drowning out the potential distortions of “personal significances”—the ghosts of lost objects. These ghosts are silenced not only from a societal refusal to fully acknowledge the significance of their deaths, but also from an insistence on the absolute significance of the event, rather than the individuals directly affected by it. In its fixation on external (en)closure, the Katrina Memorial denies the hospitality of incorporative mourning. The use of the term (en)closure in this context has connotations not only with containing the dead, but also with the memorialists’ search for “closure,” for a finite end to the process of mourning. In post-traumatic contexts, the externalization operating within the architecture of failed mourning prevalent at the Katrina Memorial can be conceived as a collective dissociative experience. According to Bessel van der Kolk et al., in post-traumatic conditions, “the memory of trauma is not integrated and accepted as a part of one’s personal past; instead, it comes to exist independently of previous schemata (i.e., it is dissociated).”³⁹ Dissociation functions as a psychological form of externalization—operating around a

³⁸ Caruth, 4.

³⁹ van der Kolk et al., 496.

refusal or incapacity to integrate a significant trauma. The Katrina Memorial, in its insistence that the traumatic event exists *independently* of all that preceded or followed it, attempts to create and contain a collective dissociative experience.

Above all, the Katrina Memorial attempts to localize and categorize the identity of the unknown and, if this is not possible, to encase it, symbolically or literally, within the finality of a tomb. In Derrida's words, "what the crypt commemorates, as the incorporated object's 'monument' or 'tomb,' is not the object itself, but its exclusion."⁴⁰ In this instance, the excluded objects are the absent bodies—those who remain undiscovered, abandoned, or ignored. As Henry A. Giroux writes, "cadavers have a way of insinuating themselves on consciousness, demanding answers to questions that aren't often asked."⁴¹ In New Orleans, it is also the knowledge of unburied bodies—those that drifted away or came to rest on street corners and sidewalks—and the detached observation of them *from the beginning* as live bodies, including the visibility of their abandonment and subsequent deaths, that must be encrypted. The labyrinth is the chosen form because it enables the closure tourists to wander *as if* they had endured the traumatic event. They are allowed to participate *in absentia* of the dead, to enact some virtual mourning, perhaps even virtual rescue and recovery, complete with the deluded finality that the bodies are safely contained within literal or symbolic tombs. The function of the site as crypt is to encase, enclose, and contain absent bodies. The memorial operates within the delusion that the unknown dead have been interred, that there is a finality to the process of mourning them.

"FAILING WELL": DIASPORIC MOURNING IN JANA NAPOLI'S FLOODWALL

The infinite multiplicity of trauma as a global phenomenon necessitates a discourse on the hospitality of mourning strangers—persons often defined according to categories of distance and difference. The ethical imperative behind this dialogue cannot be ignored. As long as certain casualties are privileged over expendable

⁴⁰ Jacques Derrida, "Fors: The English Words of Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok," trans. Barbara Johnson, in *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy*, by Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, trans. Nicholas Rand (Minneapolis: UP of Minnesota, 1986), xvii.

⁴¹ Henry A. Giroux. "Reading Hurricane Katrina: Race, Class, and the Biopolitics of Disposability," *College Literature* 33.3 (2006), 174.

others, the necessity of disaster (be it preemptive war or the escalation in so-called natural disasters) can be collectively rationalized as unavoidable. In order to begin the work of mourning the unknown it is necessary to move beyond a figuration of mourning as bordered by the known (personalized, localized), towards an understanding of the blank face of grief: a god-shaped hole capable of absorbing anyone. It is not until we are able to approach the work of mourning those who are faceless, forgotten, or unnamable, that we can collectively cease to categorize the dead as tragic or expendable, legitimate or illegitimate, familiar or other. This cessation of ownership is an integral approach toward the threshold at which we can contemplate mourning on a global scale, as an ecological act, existing beyond the individual, beyond even the human.

The Katrina Memorial's enclosure of the unknown dead within a structural recreation of the traumatic event that claimed their lives recalls Judith Butler's discussion of the appropriation of particular forms of mourning for political and national purposes. This requisition is in stark contrast to the denial and denigration of other forms of mourning, those that exist outside the parameters of preferred functional bereavements that are utilized in the "working through" of nationalist agendas:

Certain forms of grief become nationally recognized and amplified, whereas other losses become unthinkable and ungrievable. . . . A national melancholia, understood as a disavowed mourning, follows upon the erasure from public representation of the names, images, and narratives of those the U.S. has killed. On the other hand, the U.S.'s own losses are consecrated in public obituaries that constitute so many acts of nation-building.⁴²

The Katrina Memorial contains bodies that interrupt dominant cultural narratives of patriotism and privilege—casualties that testify, rather, to systemic governmental failure and neglect. Beyond this discussion of the categorization of deaths in terms of grievability is the question of how the public segregation of those deemed ungrievable constitutes a failure in the hospitality of mourning. The structure displaces the anonymous Charity Hospital dead who

⁴² Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004), xv.

originally inhabited the site, even as it seeks to permanently entomb the “forgotten” and “unknown” remains of Hurricane Katrina.

In the context of hospitable mourning, Derrida offers an understanding of haunting as visitation: the ghost as guest, the haunted as host. “The spectre *appears* to present itself during a visitation It (re)pays us a visit, since it returns to see us and . . . translates well the recurrence or returning, the frequency of a visitation.”⁴³ Despite the reciprocity implicit in this representation of haunting, it is not entirely hospitable, because it is not entirely without imposition. The visit is, by nature, an imposition on the host, no matter how willing, for, as Derrida explains, haunting inevitably invokes anxiety:

If such a conjuration seems welcoming and hospitable, since it calls forth the dead . . . it is never free of anxiety. This anxiety in the face of the ghost is properly revolutionary. If death weighs on the living brain of the living . . . it must then have some spectral density. To weigh is also to charge, tax, impose, indebt, accuse, assign, enjoin. And the more life there is, the graver the specter of the other becomes, the heavier its imposition. And the more the living have to answer for it. To answer for the dead, to respond to the dead.⁴⁴

Perhaps, then, the relative success or failure of mourning depends on how one responds to the weight of this “spectral density,” how one responds to the dead, and the anxiety their visit produces. In the Derridian sense, there can be no truly successful mourning, since mourning never really ends. This question of anxiety speaks to the paradox of mourning: to engage in normative, functional bereavement that moves beyond attachment to the lost object constitutes a failure of hospitality toward the dead, it necessitates their expulsion. Mourning, for Derrida, is an impossible command; the “law of mourning” demands that “in order to succeed, it would have to *fail*, to fail *well*.”⁴⁵ The incorporation of the other, which Freud originally conceptualized as a failure of mourning, is itself an act of

⁴³ Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 101.

⁴⁴ Derrida, *Spectres*, 109.

⁴⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Mémoires for Paul de Man*, trans. Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler, Eduardo Cadava, and Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia UP, 1989), 144.

hospitality, a preparation for spectral visitation. Nevertheless, Derrida insists that the ghost, while existing within us, is simultaneously entirely removed from us, “an interiorization of what can never be interiorized.”⁴⁶ The failure of normative mourning (as “working through” loss) then becomes an act of refusal, rejecting the productivity of grief, refusing to complete the “work” of mourning. The Katrina Memorial constitutes a failure not only of incorporative but also of hospitable mourning: the enclosed structure quarantines the dead and excludes the living.

In contrast to the architectural enclosure of the Katrina Memorial, Jana Napoli has created a transient site of mourning that inhabits the territory of memorialization while preserving a sense of reverence for the unknown. *Floodwall*, Napoli’s site-specific sculptural installation, is composed of 710 household drawers salvaged from street-side debris following Hurricane Katrina. Wandering the vacant streets of her drowned city, Napoli instinctively began collecting and cataloging discarded drawers: “I wanted to take this intimate and homely detritus out of this sodden world.”⁴⁷ In collaboration with artist Rondell Crier and oral historian Tatiana Clay, Napoli has constructed an interactive digital archive that seeks to identify the drawers’ original owners and share their stories, which form an integral part of every exhibit.⁴⁸ *Floodwall* has been constructed in three varying incarnations: the vertical or “wall configuration,” which stands as a “monument of immeasurable loss,” the horizontal or “tombstone” configuration, which functions as a “memorial and sentinel of the past,” and the “enclosed or room” configuration, which “envelops the spectator in . . . the unutterable loneliness of deep mourning.”⁴⁹ Napoli’s installations hinge on their reconstructive portability. Her drawers allude to losses that cannot be internalized—absences we nevertheless carry with us, which

⁴⁶ Pascale-Anne Brault. “To Reckon with the Dead: Jacques Derrida’s Politics of Mourning,” Editor’s Introduction, *The Work of Mourning*, by Jacques Derrida (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001), 11.

⁴⁷ Jana Napoli, “Artist’s Statement,” http://www.floodwall.org/artist_statement_napoli.html. (Accessed February 2010).

⁴⁸ As each drawer was collected, Napoli recorded the address where it was retrieved. As *Floodwall* began to take shape, not only as a traveling sculptural installation, but also as cultural phenomenon reflective of the reconstructive capacity the city of New Orleans, Napoli enlisted the help of artist Rondell Crier and oral historian Tatiana Clay, who searched for surviving owners, friends, or relatives who could share stories associated with these cultural artifacts. Their stories form a component of *Floodwall* installations and will eventually be incorporated into the website. For a sample of this digital archive, see: http://www.floodwall.org/drawers_stories.html. (Accessed February 2010).

⁴⁹ Jana Napoli, “Artist’s Statement.”

surround and contain us in some fundamental way. By virtue of their vacancy, Napoli's drawers invite empathetic projection, memorializing the absent bodies of the unknown by situating the "tomb" in miniature: the empty drawer. The "room configuration" speaks to the "envelop[ing]" hospitality of an interior while remaining essentially external. It seeks to enclose the living, rather than the dead, in the impenetrable silence of mourning.

Napoli has exhibited widely across the United States and Europe. In January 2007, *Floodwall* occupied the Liberty Street Bridge of the World Financial Center. Against a backdrop view of the raw excavation of Ground Zero, the drawers stood, in Napoli's words, "like empty luggage without their passengers and flowing like a levee broken in places."⁵⁰

In contrast to the Katrina Memorial, *Floodwall* figures the empty drawer/vacant tomb not as public crypt but as symbol and signifier of the otherness of the dead, who remain nameless and tombless, and thus, in Derrida's words, "all the more sublime."⁵¹ Napoli's work involves an acknowledgment of the "blank spaces" that exist in the face of mourning.⁵² Standing upright, empty of their contents, the drawers act as uncanny reminders of New Orleans's cemeteries:

The light glints off the veneer fronts and you think of a graveyard of marble slabs with only a few words to explain the wonder of flesh. Something says, look on, Visitor, for once we were full of life like you.

Then you notice the space between the drawers. This is a useless wall you think. It cannot hold anything back. . . . Ghosts pass through the gaps in the drawers and coldly pass through bystanders. Ghosts looking for the city of New Orleans and for the treasures these drawers once contained.⁵³

⁵⁰ Jana Napoli, "Artist's Statement."

⁵¹ Derrida, *Mémoires*, 26.

⁵² Interview with Jana Napoli, September 2008.

⁵³ Terry Lee Park, "From New Orleans to Ground Zero," *Floodwall Exhibition Catalog* (Whirlwind Creative: 2007), 3.



Figure 5: *Floodwall*, Liberty Street Bridge Exhibit. © Jana Napoli. Reproduced with permission.

The startling emptiness of *Floodwall's* drawers conjures, in Derrida's words, an "intrinsic exteriority" that invites projection, remaining estranged from the spectator while evoking an innate sense of familiarity.⁵⁴ Napoli's empty drawers enact a phantom limb

⁵⁴ Jacques Derrida, *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. Christine Irizarry (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 16.

tangibility that is felt most acutely in its absence, a literal embodiment of Derrida's "vacant centre."⁵⁵ *Floodwall* attempts the dissolution of an egocentric perspective in mourning. The installation preserves the otherness of haunting by obliterating, at least temporarily, the need for interiorization through the provision of an *external* site for the mourning of the anonymous dead. *Floodwall* invites Katrina's ghosts to inhabit the "blank spaces" of their absence via the startling hollowness of the drawers. This reciprocal habitation allows the viewer to imagine one's own belongings in the drawer, one's own body in the tomb.



Figure 6. *Floodwall*, Liberty Street Bridge Exhibit. © Jana Napoli. Reproduced with permission.

⁵⁵ Jacques Derrida, *On Touching*, 16.

Floodwall acts as an exterior but empty tomb, infinitely hospitable in its patient vacancy. This crypt is contained neither within the body nor the psyche (at least not entirely). The unknown dead are reverentially invited to occupy an external artifact. The distinction between the “success” of this (paradoxical) external site of incorporative mourning and the failed encryption of the Katrina Memorial hinges on its conceptions of transience and reverence: a quiet insistence on the *portability of ghosts*. A series of hollow tombs are repetitively constructed and deconstructed. In contrast, the enclosure and localization of the Katrina Memorial insists that the space of mourning is designated and confined. *Floodwall* refigures exteriorization as a form of mourning that “fails well” in its refusal to enclose the other, establishing instead portable altars that enact the hospitality of incorporation, providing a perpetual home for diasporic ghosts.

FIGURES

Fig. 1: Artist’s rendering of Katrina Memorial, © Matthews International, reproduced with permission.

Fig. 2: The Katrina Memorial. April 2010, photograph by the author.

Fig. 3: The Katrina Memorial. April 2010, photograph by the author. The gates are all that remain of this section of the original Charity Hospital Cemetery.

Fig. 4: Search and rescue code preserved on a Garden District home, photograph by the author.

Figs. 5-6: Floodwall, Liberty Street Bridge Exhibit, © Jana Napoli, reproduced with permission.

Post-Katrina Citizen Media: Speaking NOLA

Maria T. Brodine

Much of the existing literature about the practice of blogging, citizen media/journalism, and other online “counterpublics” assumes that the emergence of a globalized “digital culture” is inherently democratic due to the fact that any participant is allowed “to post and upload files, information, and news without a formal editorial moderation or filtering process.”¹ Recent ethnographic studies are beginning to explore the political and economic aspects of the World Wide Web—and its relationship with offline activities—in more depth, highlighting the complexities of digital culture.² This ethnographic case study of post-Katrina blogging in New Orleans seeks to further problematize the notion of independent media as inherently democratic or exclusively digital. I argue that by taking a material culture studies/actor network theory approach—which means, in part, acknowledging that no technologies are indifferent, and that all are political³—we can better understand how bloggers and blogs, through a kind of political economy generated by practices such as “linking,” form a social hierarchy, essentially instituting a “peer-review process” by which certain blogs or bloggers become more reputable than others. Secondly, I use ethnographic data to show how certain professionalization practices within an emergent “independent media” draw from other systems of evaluation common to the mainstream news media and the publishing industry, in part to advance citizen journalists’ success in challenging dominant news sources. Finally, I argue that if independent media are in truth linked “to [offline] trends and developments predating the World Wide Web,”⁴ it is essential to understand how the issue of real-world access to computers, high-

¹ Mark Deuze, “Participation, Remediation, Bricolage: Considering Principal Components of a Digital Culture,” *The Information Society*, vol. 22 (2006), 63-75. Deuze is building on the scholarship of Bowman and Willis (2003) and (2005), Hyde (2002), Gillmor (2004).

² See Tyrone Adams and Stephen A. Smith, *Electronic Tribes: the Virtual Worlds of Geeks, Gamers, Shamans, and Scammers* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008); Tom Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); and Celia Pearce and Artemesia, *Communities of Play: Emergent Cultures in Multiplayer Games and Virtual Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2009).

³ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁴ Deuze, 65.

speed Internet, and other amenities results not in “widespread integration of ... [the] Internet in all aspects of everyday life”⁵ but in the generation of a more complicated scenario, one in which the Internet democratizes information and knowledge production for some while producing certain exclusionary practices inherent in computer-mediated, network, and link-based activities. Such activities may render offline publics invisible and unaccounted for less in citizen media accounts themselves than in the academic and journalistic discourses engaging with those accounts, as the personal and local stories reported by citizen media enter into a political economy ranging beyond the local.

When Hurricane Katrina hit the New Orleans area on August 29th, 2005, CNN conjured visions of a contraflow interstate turned into a parking lot of cars, stories about snipers and “looting,” aerial photographs of people trapped on roofs, panoramas of foundations underwater and roofs in flames, and reports of botched rescue efforts. Eighty-five percent of the Greater New Orleans area was flooded, with water as deep as 25 feet in some areas. While the hurricane did not hit the city directly, the enormous storm surge resulted in over fifty levee breaches and instances of overtopping. Subsequent reports called Katrina “one of the nation’s worst disasters ever... [caused by] engineering and engineering-related policy failures.”⁶ Casualties settled at the indeterminate number of 1,836 in Mississippi and Louisiana (not counting the missing). But what caused the flooding was not out yet in the news in late August and early September. Instead, as is often the case, the same images and terrible stories repeated over and over again, their content limited by

⁵ Deuze, 66.

⁶ This is based on a number of extensive engineering reports and independent peer reviews conducted concerning the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. These include Christine F. Andersen, Jurjen A. Battjes, David E. Daniel, Billy Edge, William Espey, Jr., Robert B. Gilbert, Thomas L. Jackson, David Kennedy, Dennis S. Mileti, James K. Mitchell, Peter Nicholson, Clifford A. Pugh, P.E., George Tamaro, Jr., and Robert Traver. “The New Orleans Hurricane Protection System: What Went Wrong and Why: A Report by the American Society of Civil Engineers.” *Hurricane Katrina External Review Panel*. (Reston: ASCE Publications, 2007). See also R.B. Seed, R. G. Bea, R. I. Abdelmalak, A. G. Athanasopoulos, G. P. Boutwell, J. D. Bray, J.-L. Briaud, C. Cheung, D. Cobos-Roa, J. Cohen-Waeber, B. D. Collins, L. Ehrensing, D. Farber, M. Hanemann, L. F. Harder, K. S. Inkabi, A. M. Kammerer, D. Karadeniz, R.E. Kayen, R. E. S. Moss, J. Nicks, S. Nimmala, J. M. Pestana, J. Porter, K. Rhee, M. F. Riemer, K. Roberts, J. D. Rogers, R. Storesund, A. V. Govindasamy, X. Vera-Grunauer, J. E. Wartman, C. M. Watkins, E. Wenk Jr., and S. C. Yim. “Investigation of the Performance of the New Orleans Flood Protection Systems in Hurricane Katrina on August 29, 2005: Final Report.” *Digital Commons* (Available at <http://works.bepress.com/rmoss/17/>, 31 July 2006) and Ivor van Heerden and Mike Bryan, *The Storm: What Went Wrong and Why During Hurricane Katrina—The Inside Story from One Louisiana Scientist* (New York: Penguin Group, 2006).

the inability of news anchors and their equipment to access locations and recover technical specifics.

Looking for more information, I found something called a “NOLA blog,” which led to the discovery of “the NOLA blogs,” most of which began during the immediate aftermath of Katrina. By 2006, they were booming. These residents of New Orleans called themselves “NOLA bloggers,” “netizens,” and “citizen media” or “citizen journalists.” Citizen journalists are defined by proponents as members of the public “playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information...to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires”⁷—that is, producers of citizen media. Thus defined, NOLA bloggers wrote about the process of evacuation (or escape) and return, the role of mainstream media, the ongoing devastation after the storm, the failure of the levees, local and national politics, and their individual and collective battles with insurance companies and with FEMA over the provision of temporary trailers and funds. Over time, while most mainstream news outlets still used the term “natural disaster,” many NOLA bloggers recast the disaster as a “federal flood” and “engineering disaster” rather than a natural one, stressing their views not only about the inadequacy of the rescue response but about the failure of the political process to forestall a preventable engineering disaster. Immediately evident in these responses was the degree to which the bloggers linked to one another online, not only in individual posts, but in long blogrolls—that is, lists of related blogs under headings such as “NOLA bloggers” or “citizen media.” By emerging as citizen media, the bloggers cast themselves as on-the-ground journalists that could provide a more authentic, locally-based kind of news that often challenged or added depth and personal experience to mainstream news reports. Their accuracy as citizen media seemed to depend not only on reporting about Katrina, the aftermath, and related issues, but also about daily life in New Orleans and why it was a city worth rebuilding. Their accuracy also depended on their valuation of one another, first through the normal online processes of searching and linking, and later through offline

⁷ S. Bowman and C. Willis, “We Media: How Audiences are Shaping the Future of News and Information,” *The Media Center at the American Press Institute* (2003); and Jay Rosen, “The People Formerly Known as the Audience,” *PressThink* (27 June 2006), http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2006/06/27/ppl_frmr.html#.

conferencing, oratory, awards, informal parties, and other professionalizing activities.

SPEAKING FOR NOLA: BLOGS, BLOGGERS, AND THE VOICELESS

Which came first, the blog or the blogger? On May 29th, 2006, Dangerblond wrote⁸:

This weekend, I...met some of the New Orleans bloggers who have been nothing but words on a monitor to me until now... The mainstream media's coverage of the recent elections and the congressional panty-twist involving William Jefferson have left me more convinced than ever that if you want to know what is going on in New Orleans, one of America's greatest and most newsworthy cities, you need to read the blogs. People just don't get it unless they live here. This is a big American city. Everything that has happened here can also happen in your city. Everything that has happened here is important to you. In our fate, it is possible to see your future. If you want to know what the results of your compact with the American government will be, take a look at the loneliest, most anonymous and over-looked person in New Orleans.

A number of important points can be gleaned from this post. First, when Dangerblond refers to "the New Orleans bloggers" and "the blogs," she does not mean everyone who blogged about Katrina or about New Orleans, but about a specific group of residents that linked to one another and, by the date of this post, were beginning to meet and organize in person. By this point, Dangerblond herself was sharing mutual links with other members and receiving links from a great many others. The next important point is that most of these bloggers began blogging independently of one another, then met each other online through a process of searching, following existing links, and adding these links to their own blogs. Then, members of this group of bloggers met each other offline, organizing events

⁸ Dangerblond (29 May 2006), <http://www.dangerblond.org>.

known as “geek dinners” and, later, a conference called “Rising Tide” that attracted prominent speakers like actor and comedian Harry Shearer.⁹ Third, echoing other NOLA bloggers, Dangerblond wrote as if “the blogs” channel the voice of New Orleans. A similar sentiment was expressed by the author of the *Da Po’ Blog*, who had this to say on October 27th, 2005 at 8:59 AM, upon returning to New Orleans after evacuation¹⁰:

Speaking of New Orleans. . .

I started this weblog four days before I packed my family in a car and ran from a storm called Katrina. I wanted to speak for my city, New Orleans. I wanted to promote what was going right in my city, shine a light on what was going wrong, and hold the powerful accountable for the plight of the powerless. While I believe these goals to be valiant before the storm, I see them as essential after Katrina. The problems of my city are now out in the open. The solutions are scattered somewhere in the debris that still lines our streets weeks after the hurricane made landfall. As New Orleanians return to their city, they are going to talk about what happened. And they are going to talk about it like only New Orleanians can. And they are going to find solutions like only New Orleanians can. Down here, we speak a different language. We speak New Orleans. On this blog, I’m going to speak New Orleans. Feel free to listen.

With an authenticity gained from lived experience, many NOLA bloggers contrasted their work with mainstream news outlets. They often wrote about topics that are more broadly about daily life in New Orleans. While Dangerblond wrote about evacuating as well as a host of other Katrina-related experiences, much of her blog—which dates back to February, 2006—is dedicated to describing her participation in preparing and designing for events and festivals such as Mardi Gras.

Margaret Saizan, a blogger who describes herself as a citizen journalist (but not quite a NOLA blogger, since she does not live in

⁹ Harry Shearer, himself a blogger, is a popular celebrity in New Orleans. He recently directed a full-length Katrina-genre documentary, explaining why Katrina is an engineering disaster, entitled “The Big Uneasy.”

¹⁰ da po’ blog, <http://dapoblog.blogspot.com/>.

New Orleans), lives in Baton Rouge. This fact enabled her to begin her “storm journal,” called *Beyond Katrina*, prior to the storm’s landing. Because she had a generator at her home she was able to post throughout the crisis, and during the night of the storm she stayed up all night posting updates about what the weather conditions were like and the kinds of things her neighborhood was experiencing. Later, as news reports began to come in, Saizan posted pictures and links to news sites, reports she had heard from other people, and reflections on her own jumbled emotions surrounding the catastrophe. People began to post comments on her blog asking for help, hoping that readers would help them find their loved ones. Saizan also posted emails that she received. This kind of activity was sustained throughout September, the busiest month for Katrina-related blogging.¹¹ Later she posted on a greater variety of issues, addressing the task of the rebuilding of New Orleans while sharing humorous captions and articles and featuring “guest authors.” *Beyond Katrina* won an award from the Society for New Communications Research in 2006. When asked about the success of her blog, Saizan responded¹²:

I’ve really been authentic as a writer and that piques people’s interest. That’s also what makes blogs different from other modes of media—the authenticity—their popularity in general is attributed to this... Best I can say is that I’ve approached my blog very professionally even with its humanitarian focus. But I also have a lot of training and experience in the areas that are important to success in publishing.

Some bloggers, like the author of *Da Po’ Blog*, saw their role as oppositional to traditional news outlets, while others saw theirs as supplemental. Saizan saw her work as supplementary to the mainstream press, filling a crucial niche coming out of the “heart of experience.” She also noted the importance of news outlets, however, saying that since bloggers depend on external news sources, linking to and centralizing information, blogs would not exist without traditional news outlets. In fact, she said during this interview that she expected the traffic on her blog to “taper off about the same time

¹¹ Technorati, “Web Statistics: September 2005,” <http://technorati.com/>.

¹² This information was gleaned in a 2006 interview with Margaret Saizan, as well as from her blog *Beyond Katrina: The Voice of Hurricane and Disaster Recovery*, <http://www.hurricane-katrina.org/>.

Katrina left the front pages of the big newspapers” but that people kept coming, so she kept offering content. In 2006, she said that it is important to continue providing coverage of Katrina because “we’ve got about a decade of recovery ahead of us.”

Saizan echoed several other prominent bloggers who alluded to blogging as a professional endeavor requiring specific skills, perhaps as a way to counter certain criticisms of citizen journalism as a de-professionalization of reporting.¹³ In addition to publishing skills, design was crucial: she mentioned the overall format and appearance as important, as well as “framing Katrina in the context of a bigger picture” and offering a variety of types of entries. Other bloggers with an interest in the professionalization of citizen media include Loki of *Humid City*¹⁴ and Alan Gutierrez of *Think NOLA*.¹⁵ They have trained aspiring NOLA bloggers, sharing technical, design, and networking skills that would help bloggers to professionalize their content and appearance.

The subject of the mainstream news media came up in many other blogs. Jeffrey, who authors *Library Chronicles*, addressed the tardiness of corporate media in catching up with the level of devastation faced by New Orleans. In the following post he linked to a CNN article he considered inadequate as “the official version”¹⁶:

The big disconnect on New Orleans

[link] The official version; then there’s the [link] in-the-trenches version

Interestingly, NOLA bloggers often link to outside sources such as CNN and then provide commentary on them. As Saizan pointed out, bloggers act as centralizers of information. However, another function of the citizen journalist is clearly to act as a media critic. Many provide an alternative to the “official version” of events by linking to independent news outlets and local organizations, demonstrating alliances with them. In some cases NOLA bloggers were able to cover stories that later filtered into mainstream media.

¹³ T. Grubisch, “Grassroots Journalism: Actual Content vs. Shining Ideal,” *USC Annenberg, Online Journalism Review* (6 Oct. 2005) and “Potempkin Village Redux,” *USC Annenberg, Online Journalism Review* (19 Nov. 2006). See also V. Maher, “Citizen Journalism is Dead,” *New Media Lab, School of Journalism & Media Studies* (South Africa: Rhodes University, 2005).

¹⁴ *Humid City: Handing New Orleans a Megaphone Since 2005*, <http://humidcity.com/>.

¹⁵ Alan Gutierrez, *Think NOLA*, <http://thinknola.com/>.

¹⁶ Jeffrey, “How to Help,” *Library Chronicles* (2 Sept. 2005), <http://librarychronicles.blogspot.com/>.

For example, NOLA blogger Michael Homan described the “camps” that he experienced firsthand while trying to leave the city in the post-Katrina chaos.¹⁷ According to Homan, people who tried to evacuate on foot from New Orleans at this time were denied the right to pass parish lines by armed police officers, leaving them with no choice but to stay in “camps” near checkpoints that lacked shelter, food, and water. Referencing the same phenomenon, Jeffrey posted in *Library Chronicles*: “The piggishness and inhumanity on display here is unforgivable. First, the poorest and most helpless are left behind to die... then when they are reluctantly allowed to escape they are treated as a threat to ‘assets.’ Someone should have to answer for this. I doubt anyone will”.¹⁸

Ironically, many of those who suffered from the levee breaches and poor evacuation planning belong to the same demographics that are underrepresented in Internet use. Some NOLA bloggers have reflected on this irony, while still expressing the need to represent “the voiceless.” Many of them belong to a more privileged demographic: they are white, middle class, and identify somewhere left of center in American politics. Despite their claims to authenticity and the ability to “speak New Orleans,” their demographic reality reflects the statistics of Internet use, which privileges those who have the time and technology to blog.¹⁹ In addition, their own linking patterns demonstrate a tendency to organize along ideological lines, in accordance with similarity of experiences and beliefs. This reality points to the definitional problems associated with categories such as producers, consumers, and “publics” or “citizens,” evoking the need to understand blogs not only in terms of their human “authors” and audiences, but also as forms of communication shaped by many actors, and composed of historically, socially, and technologically-situated materials, including but not limited to images, code, and computers.

BLOGS AS VISUAL HIERARCHY; LINKS AS CURRENCY

¹⁷ Michael Homan, “One of the Millions of Hurricane Katrina Stories,” *Michael Homan* (5 Sept. 2005), <http://michaelhoman.blogspot.com/search?q=camps>.

¹⁸ Jeffrey, “How to Help” *Library Chronicles* (2 Sept. 2005), <http://librarychronicles.blogspot.com/>.

¹⁹ Kenneth R. Wilson, Jennifer S. Walin, and Christa Reiser, “Social Stratification and the Digital Divide,” *Social Science Computer Review* (2003), 21-33.

It is easy, at first glance, to see blogs as text-based phenomena. However, the properties that make blogs distinct from other forms of media have to do with a particular form of visual arrangement. This form allows the presentation of an interface that mediates complex and dynamic interactions between the blogger, the blog (as a representation projected by the blogger in concert with a computer and HTML code), and an audience (whose members connect with one another through a sociotechnological network whose relative center is the blog in question). It should also be noted that in addition to texts, bloggers often post a range of embedded media including film clips, photographs, and audio tracks. Thus, it becomes clear that blogs are not only textual, but function as visual maps; they are hybrid forms dependent upon the use and arrangement of many bits of standard HTML code known as “links.” Thus blogs can be understood as expressions of a database—a “structured collection of data”²⁰—combining heterogenous elements linked to one another and to other sites in such a way as to facilitate the production of non-linear textual and visual narratives.

The entire Internet depends on the process of linking, but the blog arguably takes the most advantage of, or depends the most upon, the dynamic nature of links. On traditional web sites, links hold the structure of the site together, allowing visual and topical organization while still connecting separate pages together or allowing the viewer to skip from the top to the bottom of a page. However, these sites tend to be static, lacking conductivity for interaction. Blogs, in contrast, are adapted for constant change and interaction with other sites, blogs, and home computers through the process of in-text linking, maintaining blogrolls, and exchanging comments on individual posts. This structure allows a blogger to write new material easily and to engage in direct and indirect conversations with other bloggers and with her audience, thus producing both visual and textual narratives. According to Dave Winer²¹:

A weblog is a hierarchy of text, images, media objects and data, arranged chronologically, that can be viewed in an HTML browser...with a human guide who you get to know. There are many guides to choose from, each

²⁰ Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2001), 218-228.

²¹ Dave Winer, “The History of Weblogs,” *Weblogs.com News*, <http://oldweblogsocomblog.scripting.com/historyOfWeblogs>.

develops an audience, and there's also comradery and politics between the people who run weblogs, they point to each other, in all kinds of structures, graphs, loops, etc.

Other important hierarchies are evident in certain features and properties of the blog form. Blog posts are arranged chronologically, but with the most recent post on top, emphasizing the importance of the present moment and visually presenting the past as a causal progression (or regression) of events. A blog acquires status with age and with frequency of posts. Usually miniature calendars in the margin of the blog offer access to older posts while displaying the longevity of the blog. "Keyword" or "tag" clouds are another important feature of some blogs. These are visual representations of a simple quantitative measure, illustrating which tags are most popular by making words appear large or small relative to one another according to the frequency with which the blogger used them to label posts. Clicking on a single tag will generate a link to all of the posts that are labelled by that tag. Thus, tags help to shape the frequency and diction around certain topics and reveal inherent hierarchies, which shape alliances and readership.

The act of pointing and connecting, or linking, across blogs proves vital to NOLA bloggers, since this is how they generate popularity, demonstrate alliances, and create cross-narratives around keywords. When someone links to another web site, they send a portion of their own traffic there, contributing to the number of hits that site receives and increasing its rank in search engine results. In general, blogs are dependent on shared traffic: their visual formatting is optimized to encourage reciprocal promotion. Bloggers also link to one another's individual posts, thereby exchanging traffic. By way of example, Jeffrey of *Library Chronicles* often wrote posts including links to Oyster's blog *Your Right Hand Thief*. On September 2nd, 2005, the following exchange occurred²²:

What you can do for me

To all my friends out there wondering if they can do anything for Lovely, Pearlgirl, or Oyster: first, thank you for your kind offers. Second, I'll just say: please, give the maximum you can to the hurricane relief [link] charity of your choice. We're fine. We were able to evacuate, and

²² Oyster, "What You Can Do for Me," *Your Right Hand Thief* (2 Sept. 2005), <http://righthandthief.blogspot.com/>.

move in with my folks in Florida... We probably lost everything in our house, but we are insured and will manage to rebuild and get on with our lives... In short, you can help us most by contributing to the organizations who are providing relief to New Orleans and the rest of the Gulf South. They are the ones who need money, and we dearly appreciate anything you can do to help out. (Oyster 12:19pm)

[link to Oyster's 12:19pm post] How to help

What Oyster said. I am lucky. He is lucky. We have families and support. Many many others do not. Oyster linked to billmon's list. Donate. Volunteer. NO needs you. (Jeffrey 1:04pm)

As I have mentioned, one of the main ways in which bloggers display alliances is through blogrolls. While several dozen NOLA bloggers link to one another consistently in a democratic and reciprocal fashion, there are a few blogs that retain very small blogrolls. In the blogosphere, not all links are created equal. A blog with a small blogroll may be high in status, a fact that may be reflected in the author's careful reservation of links. Often such a blog will receive a great deal of links from other blogs, but the relationship is not reciprocal.²³ For example, Karen Gadbois, a citizen journalist known for scaring local politicians into action, has a small blogroll on two of her sites (*Squandered Heritage* and *Northwest Carrollton*).²⁴ Receiving a link from Gadbois would be highly prized, but nearly all of the other NOLA bloggers link to at least one of her blogs and occasionally reference her work.

NOLA bloggers often post other links that interest them, presenting their associations with political networks and alliances beyond the topic at hand. For example, following links may lead to subjects such as holistic health, leftist politics, conservatism, or gun rights. Howie Luvzus, a NOLA blogger, links to such sites as *Jesus Politics* and *Militant Moderate Musings*.²⁵ His political inclinations contrast with those of many NOLA bloggers, most of whom link to

²³ Stephen Ornes, "Map: Welcome to the Blogosphere," *Technology/Computers, Discover Magazine* (20 Apr. 2007), <http://discovermagazine.com/2007/may/map-welcome-to-the-blogosphere>.

²⁴ Karen Gadbois, *Northwest Carrollton*, <http://northwestcarrollton.org/>, and *Squandered Heritage*, <http://www.squanderedheritage.com/>.

²⁵ Howie Luvzus, <http://howieluvzus.com/>.

leftist or liberal sites of various kinds (and who, importantly, sometimes do not link to Luvzus' blog or include it in their blogrolls). In this way bloggers use their front pages to connect their citizen media projects with other causes, to expand their network according to common interests and experiences, and to promote the "market value" of their own and other blogs.

In the case of the NOLA bloggers, Internet connectivity facilitated the formation of a citizen media enclave along decidedly political lines, simultaneously defining a frame for who and what could legitimately represent New Orleans and the post-Katrina experience there. As Couldry has pointed out, much existing media theory has the tendency to portray various kinds of media as if they "were the natural channels of social life and social engagement, rather than highly specific and institutionally focused means for representing social life and channeling social participation."²⁶ By engaging more critically with various types of media—including blogs—as hierarchical, historically-constructed forms that navigate highly politicized networks made up of asymmetrical links, it becomes possible to understand how they function in relation to other online, and offline, publics. Understanding them in this way also enables us to move beyond the blogs as mere expressions of a database. Following the blogs, we may go offline, returning to New Orleans.

GOING OFFLINE (BUT STILL BLOGGING): RISING TIDE, THE CONFERENCE

NOLA bloggers in particular demonstrate the way in which an online network can function as a locally situated phenomenon, as well as a means of generating new associations within a particular geographic location—in this case, the city of New Orleans. Subsequent to establishing their own blogs and connecting with one another online, NOLA bloggers organized offline events, including the annual conference "Rising Tide." I met some of the NOLA bloggers in person on August 23rd, 2009, a few days before the fourth anniversary of Katrina, at a mixer held the night before "Rising Tide IV: Sinking to New Heights."²⁷ While most people wrote their blog handles

²⁶ Nick Couldry, "Actor Network Theory and Media: Do They Connect and On What Terms?," in Hepp et. al, eds., *Cultures of Connectivity* (2004).

²⁷ *Rising Tide IV: Sinking to New Heights*.

under their formal names, I wrote “anthropologist” on my name tag and entered the mixer. Finding it difficult to read the name tags, I asked blogger Adrastos if he could point out some of the bloggers to me. Having read their blogs, I still couldn’t match a face with a name. “It’s best just to go up and introduce yourself to people,” he said, and described how the bloggers had met each other in the same manner. The emphasis on face-to-face interaction surprised me. Later, a blogger informed me that at previous mixers, participants didn’t mix real names with blogging identities on their name tags, in order to preserve anonymity for those who wanted it. “But we kind of gave up on that; it became irrelevant,” he said. A blogger by the name of Tim told me that face-to-face interaction was becoming more and more important among the bloggers. “Now, one of us will post something and then we’ll call each other up and talk about it. Before, all of that used to happen in the comments section.”²⁸

At “Rising Tide IV” there were several breaks in between panels for the purpose of “mixing and mingling.” While computers were ubiquitously present throughout the audience and among the panelists—as various bloggers blogged in real time about the conference, reporting on the content of the panels—a significant portion of the conference took place in the lobby area, where people gathered in groups to talk. Panel topics included the preservation of New Orleans culture (including food and music), sports, and local politics, most specifically the upcoming mayoral race. Several bloggers expressed a desire to get more involved with other community organizations and projects whose missions center around post-Katrina recovery and the celebration of New Orleans culture.

What this development of local presence and engagement reveals is that the NOLA blogs, now an established enclave of independent media, are heavily imbricated with offline experiences and modes of cultural production. For an outsider such as myself, and for the NOLA bloggers and their audiences immediately after Katrina, the medium known as blogging afforded an opportunity to effectively shrink the distance between New Orleans and other publics, reshaping dialogue around the Katrina disaster by identifying local narratives as more “authentic” reporting than those considered mainstream. The material form of the blog and its home, the Internet, helped to shape the way in which these citizen journalists defined themselves and organized with one another. This reliance upon and interaction with the “real world”—as well as the

²⁸ Personal Communication.

hierarchical, link-based nature of blogs—effaces traditional notions of “virtuality,” a term that has been used to describe how new media “seemed able to constitute spaces or places apart from the rest of social life.”²⁹ In the midst of crisis, devastation, and a complete lack of journalistic infrastructure, NOLA bloggers were able to take advantage of lived experience and construct themselves as “obligatory passage points”³⁰ for those interested in the experiences of post-Katrina New Orleans. This means that while NOLA bloggers most likely did not displace CNN and other mainstream outlets as sources of news about New Orleans, they did provide an alternative as well as a source of criticism, and have helped to complicate the authenticity assumed by professionally-trained journalists, favoring those reporting from on-the-ground, everyday experience. Having done this, they have then redirected their newfound authority to advance and continue their reportage in the New Orleans post-Katrina landscape, thus shaping recovery efforts in important ways and successfully contributing to the definition of Katrina as an engineering, rather than a natural, disaster. As the author of *Cliff's Crib* said recently³¹:

For most of 2010 I was thinking about closing down The Crib. I was going to turn the lights off, put up some plywood and lock it up. I was just going to keep cutting the grass because you know New Orleans has a blight problem. It seems like every time I get to the point of deciding something happens. The first time I decided to do it the Saints made the Superbowl and I ended up on CNN. The next time I made up my mind I ended up in a book. Then I got an award. It fits my life pattern that the time I decide to stop I end up with more people following me... I never thought New Orleans would be the microcosm of America's issues. We always had the crime and poverty thing covered but after Katrina we have just about everything covered. We have crime, poverty,

²⁹ Daniel Miller and Don Slater. *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach* (New York: Berg, 2001).

³⁰ Michel Callon and Bruno Latour, “Unscrewing the Big Leviathan: How Actors Macro-Structure Reality and How Sociologists Help them Do So,” in Knorr-Cetina and Cicourel, eds., *Advances in Social Theory and Methodology* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 277-203. See also Michel Callon, “The Sociology of an Actor-Network: The Case of the Electric Vehicle,” in Callon, Law, and Macmillan, eds., *Mapping the Dynamics of Science and Technology* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986), 19-34.

³¹ Clifton, “Going Through the Process Again,” *Cliff's Crib* (17 Nov. 2010), <http://cliffscrib.blogspot.com/>.

racism, class warfare, urban renewal, gentrification, taxes, budget issues, charter schools, school reform, the environment, and corruption... We have everything you need to keep a blog going for years to come.

While the blogs seem well established as a new “voice of New Orleans,” and thus able to speak about “a microcosm of America’s issues,” there is still a question about how that voice will continue to be shaped by the demographics of access not only in readership but in the ability to post. The development of various other new media and communication awards (including the Ashley Morris award at the annual Rising Tide conference), the business of professional web tools like WordPress, and the existence of professional bloggers and trainers indicate the burgeoning development of a political economy with a full spectrum of participants who must be “educated” in order to participate effectively.³² Scholars should thus be careful to refute the notion that there is automatically a “decentralized, interactive, and plural Internet culture.”³³ The question must be asked and pursued: in the process of voicing, whose voice is excluded? More broadly, who, and what, is Internet or digital culture? A more critical question follows naturally: if access to the Internet enables wider participation in contemporary debates, or mobilizes action during crisis, how should the question of Internet access and training be addressed?

³² Ashley Morris was a popular, outspoken local blogger who passed away in 2008. His blog is still available for public view at <http://ashleymorris.typepad.com/>. John Goodman's character in the HBO series *Treme* was loosely based on Morris' personality and life. More information can be found at 'Blogger Ashley Morris provides some of the words for John Goodman's HBO 'Treme' character' by Dave Walker, *Times-Picayune* (April 9, 2010). Online link to article, http://www.nola.com/treme-hbo/index.ssf/2010/04/blogger_ashley_morris_provides.html.

³³ Deuze, 65.

Book Reviews

Rebecca Solnit. *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disasters.* New York: Viking, 2010. 353 Pages;

Richard Misrach. *Destroy This Memory.* New York: Aperture, 2010. 140 Pages.

In an obscure academic essay originally written in the late 1960's, philosopher Donald Davidson observes "it is easy to appreciate why we so often identify or describe events in terms of their causes and effects. Not only are these the features that often interest us about events, but they are features guaranteed to individuate them in the sense not only of telling them apart but also of telling them together."¹ We invoke causal relations, and the place of events in some scheme of such relations, in this view, in order to give them meaning, to differentiate them, and to group them under common descriptions. In *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disasters*, Rebecca Solnit addresses the causes and consequences of a category of events—earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis, and so forth—"telling them together" in Davidson's sense as a political happenings, namely "disasters."

Solnit is perhaps our most acute and creative public intellectual, a prolific and seemingly effortless writer whose beat is culture and politics and who regularly collaborates with visual artists of various sorts. Being Californian, she begins the book at home with the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and the fires that raged in its wake. Her concerns are not local, however. She takes us on a tour across continents and centuries, visiting and learning from the sites of many disasters, especially earthquakes—Lisbon (1755), San Juan, Argentina (1944), Managua (1972), Mexico City (1985), Loma Prieta, California (1989) and Tang Shan, China (2008)—but also heat waves

¹ Donald Davidson. *Actions on Essays and Events* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 179.

(Chicago, 1995 and Europe, 2003), explosions (Halifax, 1917), hurricanes (New Orleans and environs, 2005), and terror attacks (New York, 2001). In each instance Solnit focuses on causes and consequences. In so doing, she is able to establish two important things. First, she shows that what turns a disaster into a catastrophe typically is politics in the form, beforehand, of mal-distributed resources and concern and inadequate preparedness and, subsequently, of misguided elite reactions. Second, she shows that, repeatedly, popular response to disaster, while hardly flawless, is never as brutal and depraved as political and media elites suggest. The solidarities and mutual aid that common people display in the face of disasters afford, on Solnit's account, a glimpse at utopian possibilities.

In one sense there is no news in Solnit's claim that disasters are political events. It is now a commonplace, for instance, that famines result not from an absolute lack of food but of mal-distributed entitlement and access to such food as exists. Thus famine is best conceptualized as a political-economic rather than "natural" phenomenon. This insight has been extended lately by analyses of other sorts of putatively "natural" disasters.² Likewise, there is little news in the case she makes regarding the views of media and political elites. She herself draws freely on a significant body of sociological research in "disaster studies" that establishes how, repeatedly, in the wake of disaster, violence and mayhem are more likely to result from "elite panic" than from the sort of aggressive popular criminality that the elites fear. "Beliefs matter" as Solnit likes to say. And the unfounded beliefs of elites, often amplified by complicit media outlets, time and again have provided grounds for what turn out to be needlessly repressive official responses to disaster.

What is new in *A Paradise Built in Hell* is Solnit's expansive vision of political possibilities. In her account, the range of possibilities available to us becomes visible in light of the way most people act in the face of disaster. We do not need to create the individuals who might populate utopia. They are here now. This is quite an inference. But Solnit insists that:

“... accounts of disaster ... demonstrate that the citizens

² See, for instance, Amartya Sen. *Poverty and Famines* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981) and Matthew Kahn, "The Death Toll From Natural Disasters: The Role of Income, Geography, and Institutions," *Review of Economics and Statistics* 87 (2005), 271-84.

any paradise would need—people who are brave enough, resourceful enough, and generous enough—already exist. The possibility of paradise hovers on the cusp of coming into being, so much so that it takes powerful forces to keep such a paradise at bay. If paradise now arises in hell, it's because in the suspension of the usual order and the failure of most systems, we are free to live and act another way."

It is not that we should hope for disasters and the suffering and hardship they create. But we should not neglect the by-products of disaster: "it is the disruptive power of disaster that matters here, the ability of disasters to topple old orders and open new possibilities." This power manifests itself directly in politics—for example, in the rise of Juan Peron in the wake of the 1944 Argentine earthquake, in the pressures earthquakes placed on the ruling Somoza regime in Managua and the entrenched Partido Revolucionario Institucional in Mexico City, in the way Hurricane Katrina precipitated George W. Bush's descent to the bumper-sticker status of "worst president ever." But it also holds out constructive possibilities by creating spaces for popular solidarity and improvisation.

Solnit is not naïve. She understands that, in normal times, there exist "powerful forces that keep ... paradise at bay." Hence, for her, "disasters are ultimately enigmas: it is not the disaster but the struggle to give it meaning and to take the opportunity to redirect society that matters, and these are always struggles with competing interests." The lethal potential of such struggle is especially clear in Solnit's discussion of post-Katrina New Orleans. There we witness the intentionally sclerotic response of the federal government; we find the Mayor of the City and the Governor Kathleen Blanco ordering troops and police to use deadly force to prevent "looting" rather than concentrate their energies on aiding stranded citizens; we find major media outlets reporting as fact unfounded rumors of marauding gangs engaged in wanton robbery, murder, and rape; we find white vigilantes—both private citizens and police officers—shooting and killing unarmed black men. All these factors, and others, aimed to preserve what had gone before. They contributed to transforming Katrina from disaster into catastrophe. Yet we also find an outpouring of unofficial aid from across the city, the region, and beyond. We find local, activist responses such as Common Ground whose motto "Solidarity not charity" captures the spirit animating their efforts to provide food, shelter, legal advice, and medical aid to

those displaced by the storm and flooding. The aim of such groups has not been to simply rebuild—that is, to replace—what Katrina destroyed but to reform and remedy the political-economic conditions that placed so many at risk in the first place.

Among the first things Solnit discusses is the way humorous, ironic signs and graffiti emerged at sites of mutual aid following the San Francisco earthquake. She comments as well on how similar sorts of spontaneous expressions emerged following Katrina. In *Destroy this Memory* photographer Richard Misrach offers without comment a tour of post-Katrina New Orleans. As his vehicle he takes the ample supply of graffiti residents put on offer.³ In the images of destroyed cars and homes and storefronts Misrach captures, among other things, the faith (“Isaiah 26:3”), the humor (“T + E – We love what you’ve done with the place!”), the hope (“Keep the Faith!”), the bravado and defiance (“Hey Katrina!! That’s all you got? You big sissy!!!! We will be back!!! Norman, Keena, Sean, Lil Norman.”), the grief (“R.I.P Zack”), and the need to re-establish contact (“547-1347 JANE”) among people who’ve survived the storm. He also depicts scrawled indictments of insurance companies and government officials, attempts to locate friends and family who have gone missing, and anguished concern for pets, dead, lost, found, on the loose. There is plenty of profanity and some misogyny (“Katrina is a Bitch!”). And there is bluster leavened by humor, exemplified in the warning sprayed across one boarded up storefront—“Don’t try. I am sleeping inside with a big dog, an ugly woman, two shotguns and a claw hammer!” Arguably, though, one image is central to Misrach’s enterprise. It shows a wood frame house, ripped by the storm from its foundations and deposited obliquely in the middle of an unnamed residential street. In the background a red sedan, trunk popped open, is perched precariously astride a link fence between two less mobile houses. The displaced house, clapboards yellowed and roofing partially stripped, has come to rest atop of a clutch of dark fabric. Someone has spray painted a large black arrow pointing downward to the fabric, inscribing in block letters over the whole “Wicked

³ Solnit herself greatly admires Misrach and his work, which, she elsewhere suggests, encourages us “to feel the conflicts of being fully present in a complicated world.” Rebecca Solnit. *Storming the Gates of Paradise: Landscapes for Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 3.

Here it is appropriate to note that Misrach has donated all his author royalties to the Make It Right Foundation which is working to re-build sustainable, middle income housing in the Lower 9th Ward. He also has donated prints of the images in *Destroy this Memory* to a handful of museums in New York, New Orleans, Washington D.C., and Houston.

Witch.” In this scene, as in the land of Oz, we see the demise, however inadvertent, of evil. Only here it takes on a humorous twist. It likewise leaves the future unresolved—bleak perhaps, but less ominous than it might be. Misrach depicts an opening. The question is what can be made of it. The back cover of *Destroy this Memory* depicts a boarded window posing that question acutely—“WHAT NOW?”

So here we come around to a quintessentially political question: What is to be done? Solnit astutely insists that “what happens in disasters matters for political philosophy.” And, indeed, she weaves themes, observations, and objections from a host of political theorists and activists, canonical and not, throughout her reflections. She takes as interlocutors Peter Kropotkin, Thomas Hobbes, George Orwell, William Wordsworth, Dorothy Day, Thomas Paine, William James, Gustav LeBon, Winstanley the Digger, Martin Luther King, Jr., among others, arguing and agreeing with them by turns. She admits that the improvised communities that disasters call into existence are typically fleeting, “ephemeral moments.” But she wonders throughout the book whether it is possible to extend them or, better yet, to sustain a civil society consisting of robust forms of creativity, mutual aid and solidarity that does not require that disaster serve as a midwife.⁴ Solnit, in other words, invites us not just to think utopian thoughts but to take the utopian steps of recognizing the resources that already are at hand and asking how we might transform them to our own purposes.

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⁴ Here Solnit makes common cause with others who seek to disconnect political transformation from precipitating crisis. See Roberto Mangabeira Unger. *The Left Alternative* (Verso, 2009).

Christine Mehring. *Blinky Palermo: Abstraction of an Era.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008. 297 Pages;

Suzanne P. Hudson. *Used Paint: Robert Ryman.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009. 315 Pages.

In our time, the single artist monograph is becoming an endangered species. Recent titles in art history increasingly seem to be centered around movements, historical periods, or thematic or theoretical concerns. History seems doubly set against monographs concerning a single painter, the twin specters of the death of the author and the death of painting looming large over would-be scholars of Poussin, Velázquez, Pollock, or Richter. In the shadow of these twin presumed obsolescences, we find Christine Mehring and Suzanne P. Hudson's respective monographic studies *Blinky Palermo: Abstraction of an Era* and *Used Paint: Robert Ryman*.

The names of Palermo and Ryman are relatively familiar to scholars of postwar art—Ryman probably more so than Palermo on this continent. However, while most of us at least know generalities such as the fact that Ryman only painted in white, both of these painters remain largely under-studied, neither fitting neatly into survey texts or courses alongside Warhol, Judd, or even Acconci or Haacke. Mehring and Hudson both take this marginalized condition as their point of departure, attributing it to their respective subjects' choice of medium. The question thus arises: how do we discuss semi-neglected artists when the conventional format with which to do so has also fallen into neglect?

Unlike, say, Warhol or Rauschenberg, who made paintings but for whom the medium was not their primary concern, Palermo and Ryman are both what we might call "painter's painters." Following the centrality of painting to Palermo and Ryman's respective practices, Mehring and Hudson both follow the traditional conceit of narrating the careers of their subjects in chronological periods that divide the two texts into chapters dealing with different mediumistic or formal concerns. With Palermo, the task is easy, almost obvious. While the periods do overlap, the first works of his brief career were painted sculptural objects. He then moved on to *Stoffbilder* (cloth paintings), wall paintings and drawings, and finally, shortly before his early death, to *Metallbilder* (metal paintings).⁵ Dividing Ryman's

⁵ This division of Palermo's career into four distinct *oeuvres* was introduced by Anne Rorimer in her 1978 *Artforum* article "Blinky Palermo: Objects, 'Stoffbilder,' Wall Paintings" (though Palermo

much longer career comes with more difficulty, as Hudson herself acknowledges. Like Mehring's text, *Used Paint* proceeds chronologically, though, as Hudson warns in her introduction, "some years are retraced" (24). She divides her text into five chapters—somewhat fancifully, she has named them "Primer," "Paint," "Support," "Edge," and "Wall"—the last four each dealing with an aspect of Ryman's engagement with the mediumistic characteristics of painting. Unlike that of Palermo, Ryman's career cannot be divided neatly into a few mini-*oeuvres*. The seeming sameness of Ryman's work—most obviously his almost exclusive use of white paints—is countered here by the implication of a developing career in which the artist moves from one aspect of painting to another, successively "testing" the limits of process, material, shape, and exhibition.⁶ It is not necessarily Hudson's intention to narrate Ryman's career as a linear trajectory of formal or mediumistic development, though the artist obviously did add to his practice while retaining earlier concerns through the course of the fifty years that the text takes us through. Indeed, Hudson describes her project as "less about constructing a normative monograph . . . than offering a series of interlocking essays on Ryman" (24). However, the monographic format, combined with the chronological nature of her inquiry, works against what seems to be her true intention: to analyze different facets of Ryman's practice that happen to largely coincide with decades of his career.

Both texts also situate their subjects according to a formative early influence, almost in the manner of an origin story. Mehring begins with Palermo's enrollment in Joseph Beuys's famous class at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. Among his fellow students were Imi Knoebel, Imi Giese, and Jörg Immendorf, and the larger milieu surrounding the Kunstakademie included such legendary figures of postwar German art as Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke, and Anselm Kiefer. Throughout her text, Mehring returns to Palermo's relationship to his German elders and peers, culminating in her last chapter, which focuses on Palermo's collaborations with the more established and now canonical Richter.

had already died when the article was published, the *Metallbilder* were still new and had not yet been widely exhibited). Rorimer, "Blinky Palermo: Objects, 'Stoffbilder,' Wall Painting," in *Artforum* 12:3 (November 1978). Twenty-four years later, Mehring herself repeated this strategy, adding the *Metallbilder*, when she published "Four of a Kind: The Art of Blinky Palermo," also in *Artforum*. Christine Mehring, "Four of a Kind: The Art of Blinky Palermo," in *Artforum* 41:2 (October 2002).

⁶ The term "testing" recurs throughout Hudson's text. As far as I know, this term was introduced to Ryman scholarship in Yve-Alain Bois's essay "Ryman's Lab," in *Abstraction, Gesture, Ecriture: Paintings from the Daros Collection* (Zürich: Alesco AG, 1999).

Hudson proceeds from Ryman's tenure as a guard at the Museum of Modern Art in New York beginning in 1953, positioning this experience as an alternative to a formal art education—which Ryman never had. Ryman's co-workers at MoMA included Dan Flavin, Sol LeWitt, and the critic (and Ryman's future wife) Lucy Lippard. While Beuys functions in Mehring's text as both a signal example of artistic practice and social engagement, and as a neo-Romantic counter-figure to Palermo's more sober work, Hudson bases her reading of Ryman's career largely on the pedagogical models he encountered working at the Museum under the leadership of Alfred Barr and the director of the Museum's education department Victor D'Amico. Throughout her text, Hudson sustains her thesis about Ryman's practice, that he "paints pragmatism," through the biographical fact of his work under, though never directly under, Barr and D'Amico. To the credit of *Used Paint*, the force of Hudson's argument comes from her rigorous and persuasive readings of Ryman's work, but it raises the question of the role of biography in the single-artist monograph: in this late moment in the monographic format, is the artist's biography necessary as a kind of rhetorical trope to "anchor" the author's claims about the artist's career? The same question might be asked of *Abstraction of an Era*, though, as we will see, the two texts ask different favors from their subjects' biographies.

Not surprisingly given the nationalities of the two artists—and, indeed, of the two authors—we get in these two texts a German Palermo and an American Ryman. Mehring's subtitle, "Abstraction of an Era," points to Palermo's historicity, specifically as it reflects the growth of consumer capitalism during the German "economic miracle." In her chapter on the sculptural objects, Mehring traces Palermo's work back to his education in Beuys's class and reads the works as a marriage of Beuys-esque shamanism (Palermo "heals" trash and transforms it into art) with German Romanticism's obsession with the fragment, only to argue that Palermo's objects undermine these spiritual associations as they make them. The materiality of the objects (in the sense of Donald Judd's "Specific Objects"), she argues, always returns to sneer at the showy and subjectivity-laden postwar European art movements of Art Informel, the Zero Group, and neo-expressionism.⁷ In this sense, the objects foreshadow Palermo's project with the *Stoffbilder*, whose use of pre-

⁷ See Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," in *Arts Yearbook* 8 (1965).

made commercial fabrics Mehring associates with the emergent commodity capitalism.

There is a story here about postwar German culture and the *tabula rasa* that the post-Marshall Plan economic reconstruction represented. Mehring gives us something of this story between the lines, but her focus is much more on its obverse: Palermo's "de-German-ing" of his precursors and influences via his enthusiastic and idiosyncratic engagement with American art. Palermo, Mehring argues, misreads the work of a wide gamut of postwar American artists, most notably Rothko, Newman, the Minimalists, and the more systems-oriented of the Conceptualists, and the historicity of his work emerges from this specifically postwar German misprision.

Abstraction of an Era paints the picture of a German artist who would not be German. At the same time, Mehring's text, in tracing Palermo's flight from the Germanic—he literally left Germany for New York in 1973—reveals its own predilection to do the same. Most revealing is her analysis of Palermo's pivotal late work, the *To the People of New York City* suite, in which Mehring gives scant attention to Palermo's use of the colors of the German flag for his color scheme, arguing instead that the color scheme borrowed from Navajo sand painting and reflected Palermo's exotic conception of America—no doubt spurred on by his contact with land artists such as Walter de Maria through his gallerists Heiner Friedrich and Konrad Fischer. Too much can be said about the ambivalence of *To the People's* invocation of the German flag to merely relegate it to a cursory mention, particularly given the important role the author has accorded to Palermo's relationship (or lack thereof) to the German nation and her historicizing of the *Stoffbilder* within the context of postwar commodity capitalism. Upon first seeing these paintings reinstalled at Dia:Beacon, I couldn't help but recognize in their painted metal surfaces echoes of the Porsche logo, which calls to mind the German automobile industry's role in the economic miracle and its inseparable relationship with German warfare (recall the BMW logos in Hannah Höch's *Das schöne Mädchen*); indeed, the suite's epistolary title itself seems to parallel the address of Germany's burgeoning export industry. This elision of the Germanness of *To the People* in favor of Palermo's search for America is symptomatic of the manner in which Mehring's reading of Palermo's works ultimately works in the service of painting a portrait of the artist, even though this narrative frame is of a secondary importance to her text's greatest strength: its engaged historicizing of his work.

As previously stated, Hudson's text takes on the biographical convention of the monograph from the opposite direction. The Ryman we get from *Used Paint* emerges surprisingly from the discourse of American pragmatism, articulating the early influence of Barr and D'Amico through the perspective of such thinkers as John Dewey, Charles Sanders Peirce, and William James when, to this reader at least, a more likely bedfellow would be Jacques Derrida. This is not to criticize *Used Paint*, however; Hudson offers a fresh and engaging take on Ryman's work. The text sets out to dispel all the falsehoods of what we think we know about Ryman. Hudson's inquiry begins with the provocative claim that Ryman never produced a white painting until 2003. His paintings, she argues, were never until this point monochromes, as his concentration on process had always resulted in paintings in which white paint revealed its application in concert with its support. The point of Ryman's work, then, is neither about *reducing* painting to mute whiteness (as in the Minimalist interpolation of Ryman) nor the *idea* of "blank" paintings (as in the Conceptualist misreading), and indeed to pay too much attention to the white paint instead of what Ryman does with it would be, according to Hudson's argument, to miss the point.

The four main sections of *Used Paint* concentrate respectively on process ("Paint"), the conventions of painting ("Support"), the limits of painting ("Edge"), and the site of exhibition ("Wall"). Taken together, these inextricable strands of Ryman's practice constitute an investigation of painting as a *matrix*: a field of possibility delimited by pre-existing formal and discursive conventions.⁸ The following passage can be taken as a kind of mission statement for Hudson's text:

Ryman opens the material and conventional dimensions of painting to a different kind of medium-specificity [from that of Clement Greenberg and mainstream American Modernism] that involves a narrow-band infinitude of provisional answers to questions of what makes a painting, how it is made, with which materials, and why. . . . [T]his implies not a teleology—an obvious, necessary, or otherwise prescribed next step—but a zone of uncertainty to be explored (145).

⁸ This concept of the *matrix* is usually attributed to Benjamin H.D. Buchloh. See: Buchloh, "Kelly's Matrix: Administering Abstraction, Industrializing Color," in *Ellsworth Kelly: Matrix* (New York: Matthew Marks Gallery, 2003), and "Hesse's Endgame: Facing the Diagram," in *Eva Hesse Drawing*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006).

Here, we encounter a blind spot of Hudson's text. In the open-endedness that she describes of Ryman's engagement with the medium's "givens"—his "testing"—the concerns that she teases out of his practice to form her chapters reveal themselves to be inseparable, as painting for Ryman and his contemporaries was always at once "paint," "support," "edge," and "wall." Hudson's isolating of these strands and her engaged analysis of them alongside periods of Ryman's career is admirable; however, where more precision would have been welcome is the way she moves seamlessly between material, convention, and institution. In exploring Ryman's practice, I found myself wondering especially about the latter two terms: when we speak of a *matrix* of painting, how do we differentiate the conventional from the institutional? This question becomes particularly important when Hudson discusses Ryman's engagement with the site of exhibition; we are used to casually referring to exhibition spaces as "institutional," but surely Ryman's engagement with the exhibition space (and what Hudson articulates about it) asks difficult questions about the relationship between the formal conventions of display that help to constitute aesthetic experience and the institutionalized discourses that determine the social terms of this aesthetic experience.

To be fair, this blind spot of Hudson's text points to a blind spot of the discipline at large, and it is to the credit of her formal analyses that this question arises at all. This is the crucial point at which Hudson and Merhing's text converge: we have here two rigorously formal and yet historically sensitive inquiries on the episteme of postwar painting and the manner in which this supposedly outmoded medium reflects the larger social concerns of artistic production in the era. One condition of the medium in this historical period is the manner in which paintings often resist photographic documentation, of which Palermo and Ryman's are surely no exception. Both texts are generously illustrated with beautiful, mostly full-color plates, and yet to see a Palermo or Ryman painting in reproduction is to lose much of what makes them such important, if somewhat neglected, works of postwar art. But the richness of *Abstraction of an Era* and *Used Paint's* illustrations is reflected and buttressed by thoughtful and thoroughly researched analyses that bring these images to life. To suggest that the format of the single artist monograph can also be revived by these two studies is to ask a tall order of *Abstraction of an Era* and *Used Paint*, rich and careful though they are. But as an occasion to revisit the careers of Palermo

and Ryman in a far more sustained and directed manner than we have previously had the chance to, what better format than the monograph?

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Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?. Judith Butler. London: Verso, 2009. 193 pages.

Contemporary war, and the “cultural modes of regulating affective and ethical dispositions through a selective and differential framing of violence” (1), is the focus of Judith Butler’s most recent work *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* Butler’s premise that “specific lives cannot be apprehended as injured or lost if they are not first apprehended as living” (1) intervenes within contemporary epistemological and ontological arguments that inform framing, power, and being. In five essays, Butler systematically and convincingly engages the “frames” of war through her combination of Hegelian philosophy, a neo-Marxist conception of ideology, and post-structuralism.

Frames of War propels the strengths of her earlier works such as *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997), and *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005). Butler’s analysis clearly builds from the 2004 publication, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*, in which she discusses forms of vulnerability, aggression, retaliation, and violence instigated by the Bush administration post-September 11, 2001.

Precariousness is presented as an obligation imposed upon us, and as such, it also serves to mark a series of conditions that allow us to apprehend a life. In the introductory chapter, “Precarious Life, Grievable Life,” attention is drawn to certain epistemological frames that govern “being” and how “being” is therefore constituted within operations of power. It is here she situates reflections upon the iteration and reiteration of norms that govern subjects, and, extending *Gender Trouble*, the ontology that governs the body. Those norms, in combination with the concept of “recognition” stemming from Hegelian texts, offer new insight into how apprehension and recognizability shape subjects. Such a reading centralizes personhood

and the shifting schemes of intelligibility.

In Chapter 1, "Survivability, Vulnerability, Affect" Butler demonstrates that contested notions of personhood do exist: those constructed through histories of life and histories of death. We are shown there is no life and also no death without a relation to some available frame. This is not to say one cannot live or die outside of frames, but, rather, that our apprehension of the precariousness of life is governed by them. Butler's analysis of the ontological fields that govern recognition attends to normativity, and how lives are disciplined by these norms. That one cannot apprehend a life as livable or grievable if it were not first apprehended as living is both the crux of her argument and the function of framing, and it is supplied by the interrogation of being and recognizability. Butler suggests that what underlies this apprehension is that which guides interpretation and recognition. The "frame" is questioned through analysis of war photographs as those which "break out" of the frame "or break from" the frame, like the case of the digital images from Abu Ghraib circulated across the Internet. Framing is presented here as both reflexive and visual; it is not simply a concept, but also a process.

In the following chapter, "Torture and the Ethics of Photography: Thinking with Sontag," Butler further considers images through the work of Susan Sontag. Adapted from an essay originally published in 2005 by Publications of the Modern Language Association of America PMLA "Photography, War, Outrage," this chapter offers an analysis of the ethics of photography. The phenomenon of embedded reporting and Susan Sontag's final book, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), are the objects through which she conducts her analysis. Specifically, she discusses the ways suffering is presented to us through mandated visual images and how such forms of presentation affect our recognition of suffering. The visual and textual images read as signs of humanness or precariousness, and, as such, the suffering of those in the degrading and humiliating photographs require recognition. Acts of recognition break and interrupt the grand narratives that surround war and represent victims.

In what is arguably the strongest chapter, "Sexual Politics, Torture, and Secular Time," Butler expounds on the interrelations of sexual politics and minority rights by examining the specific case of the Dutch civic integration exam. For The Netherlands, cultural and political modernity is represented by sexual freedom, which consequently forces those freedoms to compete against cultural

anxieties propelled by the recent tide of Islamic immigration. Integration and acceptance become contested symbols exploited by Right-wing politicians to bleed together dialogues of minority sexual rights (rights granted to gays and lesbians) and Muslim immigration in order to position attitudes against either. Cultural, political, and religious differences are central to Dutch politics, given the murders of the right-wing politician Pim Fortuyn and filmmaker Theo van Gogh in 2002 and 2004 respectively. Sexual politics and secularism are deployed to tangle this debate by positioning such freedoms as beacons of modernity, and using incompatibilities to enforce exclusions. Butler effectively underscores how the framing of such issues, as well as the power of representation and ideology, are used to delimit legal recognition.

“Non-Thinking in the Name of the Normative,” the fourth chapter, addresses judgments and cultural practices through a consideration of subject positions. Cultural subjects and sexual subjects are used to show the limitations of the normative subject and how we can break free from notions of their incompatibilities. Recognition, subject positions, sexual and religious practices, and bodies allow an understanding of how we can rethink the subject “as a dynamic set of social relations” (162). Critical practices of interrogation allow us to break free of frameworks used to create, maintain, and promote the subject as well as identities.

In the concluding chapter, “The Claim of Non-Violence,” Butler considers non-violence through the lens of psychoanalysis. Here, many of the themes and concepts nascent in *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997) appear and evolve. Non-violence is not read as a principle but rather as a claim one makes to another (or, recalling the work of Emmanuel Levinas, as an appeal). Our ability to respond to violence and the struggle with non-violence is found not in claims against individuals or groups, but rather in social ontology. A relational social ontology forwarded by Butler offers a break in the frames through which we consider “fear and rage, desire and loss, love and hatred, to name a few” (184). The analysis here offers a new frame in which we can understand the “frames of war,” and by which self-reflexivity and non-acting advance a new way of resistance and equality.

Frames of War offers fresh insight into ethical responsiveness and political interpretation within the context of contemporary warfare. Butler clearly and concisely expresses a common-sense approach to understanding some of the most topical issues today. The compelling arguments made offer fresh thinking on narrativized

power relations but also how these relations are framed and structured in relation to critically reading visual imagery and visual culture. This might be her most relevant work to date not only for her followers in the academe but also for those with interest in exploring the discourses of war that penetrate the everyday.

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Daniel Miller. *The Comfort of Things*. Cambridge: Polity, 2008. 302 Pages.

Anthropologist Daniel Miller is recognized for his innovative studies of material culture and consumption, outlined in his 1987 publication *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* and developed through more recent works such as his 2005 edited anthology *Materiality*. Though driven by the same mode of inquiry, his new work *The Comfort of Things* departs from what Miller regards as his “usual academic tone” in its presentation of short narrative “portraits” of thirty individuals all living on a single London street that he calls “Stuart Street.” The portraits, presented as distinct chapters, were gathered as part of a larger study of 100 households conducted with graduate student Fiona Parrott to investigate the ways material objects help people deal with loss and change; the results of their investigation are forthcoming. “In the meantime,” Miller writes, “it seemed that the richness of our encounter could lend itself to a different genre of writing—one intended to share our experience with a much wider readership and also to introduce more generally the branch of anthropology I teach: material culture studies” (300).

The Comfort of Things indeed functions both as an accessible introduction to Miller’s methodology and a demonstration of how one can learn about people through the medium of their things. As part of Miller’s promotion of material culture studies alongside more traditional branches of anthropology, Miller prepares readers by discussing the limitations of using conventional interviews to learn about people’s lives. People usually present a carefully constructed script for such interviews, he writes, one that is often defensive and restrictive and doesn’t yield much useful information. To avoid relying on these unreliable narratives, Miller and Parrott asked

questions not just of the people they visited, but of the things in their homes. "We asked what decorations hung on the walls, what the people who greeted us were wearing, what we were asked to sit on, what style of bathroom we peed in, whose photographs were on display, what collections were arrayed on mantelpieces," Miller writes (2). Together, this accumulation of things presents, for Miller, a tangible expression of that person or household.

As part of this exploration, Miller investigates the role of possessions in personal relationships. At a time when it seems we are besieged with "stuff," Miller seeks to complicate common notions that connect our relationships to material possessions with our relationships to people, particularly the assumption that as we become more materialistic we become more superficial, and that our relationships with people suffer as a result. Miller claims that this assumption is rarely tested, and promises readers that "By the time you finish this book you will discover that, in many ways the opposite is true; that possessions often remain profound and usually the closer our relationships are with objects, the closer are relationships with people" (1).

With this theoretical stance in place, Miller sets his first two portraits in deliberate opposition. "Empty" is the story of George, a seventy-five-year-old man whose flat is strikingly devoid of material objects and whose life is likewise unfulfilled. "Full" is a portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Clarke, a couple who employ their heirloom decorations, priceless collections, and endless homemade pies in a complex web of social meaning, generously shared with their close network of family and friends. Taking a casual, often humorous and sympathetic tone, Miller moves to portraits of individuals falling somewhere within this continuum, such as Marjorie, a woman who has gradually accumulated an extraordinary number of photographs and decorations in an effort to provide a loving, welcoming environment for more than forty foster children. We meet Jorge, a Brazilian immigrant of Italian descent who sold part of his prized album collection to help pay for his sister's wedding, and Malcolm, who keeps his life quite literally inside his laptop, as his work schedule prevents him from keeping a flat in any one country for more than a few weeks at a time. We step inside the home of Sharon, an amateur wrestler and sociology teacher who constantly rearranges her furniture to clear her head.

Miller's relaxed narrative is bolstered by a decidedly didactic framework, guiding readers through the pitfalls of material culture research and reflecting on his own process. He admits to struggling

at points during the project, and to “the tentative nature” of some of his analyses. He writes of visiting Stan, a mercenary once hired to protect an arms dump in Colombia, responsible for dozens of civilian deaths. He had just survived the latest in a succession of suicide attempts when Miller and Parrott visited him at his home in London. “We could not help Stan find redemption,” Miller recalls. “All we did was to listen a bit. We mattered for a day or two, but not that much” (93). Miller also warns of imposing “the clichés and moralities of some TV script” upon the stories of people such as Aidan, a young man addicted to sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll. One couple had a serious argument after Miller and Parrott pointed out the marked imbalance in the number of objects each person contributed to the household. “This,” Miller confesses, “was undoubtedly our fault” (178).

After introducing readers to these thirty London residents and demonstrating the basics of material culture studies, Miller closes *The Comfort of Things* with an epilogue addressing broader concerns signaled throughout his study. He poses an ambitious question: “If this is a street in contemporary London and these are its people, what, then, is modern life, and what is the nature of that humanity which lives in these our times” (282)? Turning to social science for answers, he addresses long-standing theories suggesting that when life becomes “too modern,” without religion, nationalism, or even communism to provide a common identity, then society would fragment into isolated individuals with no purpose or order. Miller firmly rejects this idea, asserting that the individual and the household is now responsible for creating such order, and this order “is still an authentic order even if one creates it for oneself and makes it up as one goes along, rather than inheriting it as tradition or custom” (293). He finds evidence of this order in each of the households he visits.

Despite this independent control over order, Miller disagrees with the notion of a dangerous “cult of the individual,” arguing that most of his subjects in the present study equated individualism with loneliness, living alone with failure. If he were to ask them what matters in life, Miller surmises, they would almost uniformly focus on their significant relationships. While Miller acknowledges that this response would most likely indicate a desire for relationships with friends, family, and perhaps the community, he believes material objects are integral to all of these relationships. “People exist for us in and through their material presence,” he writes. “An advantage of this unusual perspective is that sometimes these apparently mute

forms can be made to speak more easily and eloquently to the nature of relationships than can those persons” (286-7).

As Miller hoped when he set out to write this book, *The Comfort of Things* provides entry into material culture studies for a wide range of readers. Some may wish to simply engage with its carefully crafted portraits, some sad, some scandalous. Others might find the book suitable as a starting point for the discipline’s more theoretical literature or as a model for similar studies. In all cases, readers will become attuned to the complex role played by objects in our lives, and indeed in our relationships with others.

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Lindsay Tuggle has a doctorate in Literary Studies from the University of Sydney. Her dissertation focused on the evolution of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855-1892) and its influences on cultural mourning practices. She is currently working on a scholarly monograph that traces strategies of anonymous and incorporative mourning across the nineteenth through twenty-first centuries, beginning with the American Civil War. Her work has been published in the journal *The Space Between: Literature and Culture, 1914-1945*, and in the edited collections *Remaking Literary History* (eds. Helen Groth and Paul Sheehan) and *Mourning and Its Hospitalities / after* (eds. Tony Thwaites and Jude Seaboyer, forthcoming).

David Redmon is currently a Radcliffe Fellow at Harvard University. His films in collaboration with Ashley Sabin have screened at Sundance, SXSW, Human Rights Watch, IDFA, and the Museum of Modern Art. The Sundance Channel, Documentary Channel, Link TV, Free Speech TV, NHK, Current TV, Scandinavian, New Zealand, European, Middle Eastern, and Australian television stations have broadcast their movies. Sabin and Redmon started the distribution branch of their production company – Carnavalesque Films – to help bring films to new audiences. Carnavalesque distributes *October Country*; *Sweethearts of the Prison Rodeo*; *Citizen Architect*; *Loot*; *Orphans*; *Manhattan, KS*; *Holy Modal Rounders*; *The New Year Parade*; and *Woodpecker*.

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