

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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