

'That Part of the World': Hurricane Katrina and the 'Place' of Local Media

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University commencement ceremonies are occasions marked by displays, some somber, some spectacular, of the achievements of graduates and the institutions that credentialed them. Increasingly used as public relations and alumni development mechanisms, university commencements have become institutional branding opportunities with the nation's universities and colleges competing for celebrities, politicians, writers, and other cultural authorities as commencement speakers. While commencement addresses are meaningful for local university or college audiences, rarely are such events considered newsworthy on a *national* level.

Such was the case during Tulane University's Spring 2006 Commencement because CNN and other local and national news channels covered the event. Titled "Commencement with the Presidents," that year's Tulane University graduation featured two former United States presidents, George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton. Given Tulane University's struggle to renew itself as an institution following the flooding of New Orleans and the surrounding areas, it seemed a fitting way to celebrate the accomplishments of students, students' families, faculty, and staff to invite Bush and Clinton as commencement speakers. Inviting them to speak at Tulane's ceremony was also a way of expressing gratitude for the monetary support and publicity that the Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund (BCKF) has generated for regional institutions of higher education. Bush and Clinton, as it has been widely publicized, began their charity relationship in response to the December 26, 2004 tsunami at the request of President George W. Bush. With the mission of raising private funds to supplement, or replace, government aid, the two former presidents have facilitated fundraising relief work in Indonesia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, and, most recently, the Gulf South of the United States. After the pomp and circumstance, talk show host and comedienne Ellen DeGeneres greeted the capacity crowd of 17,000 in the New Orleans Arena.

Tulane University's 2006 Commencement Ceremony, while anecdotal, nonetheless tells a story about the convergence of celebrity culture and philanthropy in a context that foregrounds several key points about the relationship between the events of Hurricane Katrina and local media. This convergence of different kinds of celebrities highlights the ways that news about the disaster has, in terms of a national, corporate news structure, all but disappeared, with a few notable exceptions such as Brad Pitt's "Make it Right" home-building in the Lower Ninth Ward. Local media in New Orleans continues to tell the story of ongoing disaster while the national mainstream news media has all but abandoned the city, with the exception of crime stories or other sensational news.

In media studies critiques of news discourse, distinctions are made between *publicity* and *news* in which the former, publicity, works for corporate, governmental, or individual self-interest (renamed as "public relations"), while the latter ostensibly works against greed and serves the "common good." In actuality, however, neither category is pure. It is surely the case that some journalists and news professionals do indeed believe that their work is motivated by a desire to serve "the common good," however defined or understood, but it is also surely the case that this "service" is not guaranteed, or even encouraged, by contemporary corporate news organizations.

This article examines how and under which circumstances local news and nonfiction forms such as community-based video need to be authorized and legitimated from a national, mainstream media perspective. Frequently, what counts as the national perspective is also the hegemonic or official perspective that *displaces* the credibility of *place* offered by local "eye-witnesses." By shifting the focus away from how national cable 24-7 news networks such as CNN and the Fox News Channel covered the days immediately following the disaster to the interventions of local media, this article demonstrates the

differing roles of "the local" after Anderson Cooper, Geraldo Rivera, and Shephard Smith went away.¹ It analyzes the function that local news and other documentary, community-based media serve for people for whom New Orleans was, and continues to be, their home. In other words, the article is less interested in critiquing mainstream news media as opportunistic ratings seekers than in determining how local media, news, and independent documentary productions serve local audiences.

Re-placing New Orleans: Discourses of Elsewhere-ism

Open any tourist guidebook on New Orleans to any description of New Orleans' cuisine, music, cultural events, and you will find romantic representations of the quirky and delightfully excessive "carefree"—characteristics that make the city a unique cultural experience for visitors. Even some New Orleanians acknowledge the extent to which the city and its habitants are both part of and apart from the United States. While it is the case that Louisiana and Mississippi consistently rank 49th or 50th in terms of public education funding, per capita household income, and other indicators of life quality, in Louisiana, this reality is strangely naturalized through the local sale of bumper stickers, T-shirts and baseball caps emblazoned with the slogan "Third World and Proud of It." As an unsettling local identity created by New Orleanians, it seems to both refute and support conceptualizations of the city that recognize its inhabitants as part of a larger nation.

As many New Orleanians and visitors know, there is a very tangible sense in which the city and the surrounding Gulf Coast region simply do not seem to be part of the larger nation. The slogan "Third World and Proud of It" also is evident on a *national* level through news media commentators, reporters, and political pundits. None other than President George W. Bush perhaps most cogently articulated "elsewhere-ism" discourse after his initial September 2, 2005 flyover of the flooded city: "...I got a feel for it when I flew over before...trying to conceive what we're talking about, it's as if the entire Gulf Coast were obliterated by the worst kind of weapon you can imagine. And now we're going to try to comfort people in *that part of the world*" (emphasis added).² Bush's response indicates a sense of disbelief and also a disconnection to the specificity and urgency of the Katrina disaster. These remarks were part of the same speech in which Bush declared that Michael Brown was doing a "heck of a job."³ Bush's description of the Gulf Coast and perhaps especially New Orleans as "that part of the world" suggests that the events in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama seemed to have taken place on a completely different continent or in a different hemisphere than those inhabited by other Americans. On August 31, 2005, Bush's initial view of New Orleans was framed from the perspective of Air Force One as the president returned to Washington, D.C. from his vacation in Crawford, Texas. As described by *The New York Times*, Bush went out of his way to view the destruction to "oversee the effort, getting a view of the damage en route as Air Force One altered its flight path to take him on a low-altitude pass over New Orleans and other stricken areas in Louisiana and Mississippi."⁴ The perspective from Air Force One shows the extent of the damage caused by the ruptured levees, but it avoids a more individualized, material encounter with the results of the governmentally funded and constructed U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Levee System. As Marita Sturken observes in relation to the perspective afforded by satellite imagery of weather systems, the view of Hurricane Katrina's pre-landfall mass was "weather seen from above rather than felt from below."⁵ Bush's flyover tour of the destruction facilitated a spectatorial distinction that privileged a macro vision over a micro one, placing the commander-in-chief, literally, above it all.

New Orleans occupies an inside-out kind of space in the national imaginary, a place both typical and unique. In geographical terms, the Mississippi River System that finds its opening to the gulf through New Orleans is the flowing, liquid artery that links 31 states with its grand valley, encompassing 41 percent of the continental United States.⁶ Yet, as Tara McPherson has noted, there is a "partitioned mode of thinking" that "characterizes post-World War II, post-Civil Rights discourse, proliferating binaries of rural/urban, red/blue, white/black, and us/them."⁷ This "mode of thinking" sees the South through an otherizing lens while it simultaneously negates disaster as a natural effect exacerbated by a refusal to address directly and meaningfully the marked neglect of national infrastructure, a national disavowal of deep and unrelenting poverty, the continued denial of access to life-sustaining and preventative healthcare, the re-segregating (along lines of class and race) of the public educational system, and the impact of global warming widely believed to contribute to weather patterns that include more frequent and intensifying hurricanes. The failure of the levees is a failure that affects the region as much as it affects the nation

(although this realization continues to be denied through the discourse of elsewhere-ism or a neoconservative throwing good money after bad idea of civic responsibility).

One of the ways that national media do tell the story about New Orleans and the nation includes narratives that emphasize correlations between rising crime rates in various U.S. cities such as Houston, Texas and the numbers of recently-relocated New Orleans evacuees. The *New York Times* makes this clear in a quotation from Houston homicide investigator Sgt. Brian Harris when he says that trying to get murder witnesses from New Orleans to talk to the police "was like trying to educate foreigners in the ways of the United States".⁸ This type of narrative of displacement overlooks larger questions about the long-term effects (psychological, social, political, and economic) of such an immediate displacement of a region's population.

Another story of displacement that has not received as much national attention is told from a media industry perspective that tends to focus on the effects of the loss of an entire "designated market area" (or DMA, those entities that are measured by Nielsen Media Research and upon which advertising rates on television, and in other media, depend). If it is the case that DMAs without ratings data are not included as part of the national market mosaic, then perhaps this might account for why local stories are not going to reach national levels as much as they would if local data were being measured on a consistent basis.

There's a Fire in the Garden District: National Media as Official Narrators

In the "post-Katrina" context, distinctions among apparently discrete categories of national, regional, and local news, and the knowledge frameworks that support them, are breeched, broken, and reconfigured. One view of the differences between local and national news suggests that local news organizations function as little more than quaint storytellers limited through their seemingly fixed locations while national news organizations are understood as more authoritative and thus professionally credible because of their ability to seem as if they are everywhere all at once (while still anchored in specific, albeit privileged locations like Atlanta or New York City that seem to confer scope and legitimacy). In this distinction, the local is reduced in complexity, seen as simply "there" and, as such, limited in its ability to really tell a nationally compelling and meaningful story for viewers who are "elsewhere." The assumption about local versus national knowledge can be understood through a second anecdote.

One morning in May 2006, my mother telephoned me at my home in New Orleans. Calling from Denton, Texas, my mother asked me if I knew that there was a huge fire in New Orleans' Lower Garden District (a neighborhood a few miles from my house). She was watching CNN. I told her that I did not know about a fire and, moreover, I could not switch my TV to CNN because I was videotaping *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*. DeGeneres was devoting one week's programs (portions of each one-hour program) to New Orleans "after Katrina." The information that my house was not anywhere near the fire in the Lower Garden District, however, did nothing to stop my mother's panic. These rather random events (the fire, taping *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, CNN's coverage of what might be considered a very local event, and my mother's telephone call informing me about a local experience from "elsewhere") underscore two important issues. Katrina's effects have realigned, in some senses, relations among local, regional, and national media and what the implications of the realignments might mean in relation to a displaced or "lost" local audience. It also shows how "local" knowledge from a place generally, and, I think wrongly, characterized as not being capable of credibly speaking for itself, needs to be legitimated by an outside authority. There may be nothing unique about media viewers from "elsewhere" providing information to people where local communication systems have failed. However, apart from an illustration of a mother's worry, the anecdote also shows how categories of "the local" and "the national" are dependent upon each other and, in other contexts, systematically separated. This interdependence is both denied and affirmed at different times and, ultimately, for different purposes.

Not only does the gap between national and local knowledge work in terms of a news accuracy model, but it also serves to reinforce existing ideological discrepancies in the ways public policies get implemented in relation to social and public health issues like poverty, racism, and lack of living wage employment, and lack of affordable housing. So, if it is the case that national news tends to de-privilege, in certain instances, local knowledge in favor of an overarching, paternalistic reading of events, then

Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath showed the limits on the ability of "the local" to speak for itself. Interestingly, the denial of legitimacy was not only limited to citizens, as journalists on the scene were routinely accused of lacking objectivity as they cried on camera (male reporters in tears), visibly overwhelmed by the scenes about which they were supposed objectively to describe.⁹ "Genuine" or not, these scenes of "reporters gone wild" do circulate as branding devices, or sensational eye-ball grabbers, in a competitive news industry. In spite of this recognition, I also am reluctant to limit the effects of such "feeling-based" reporting in advance. That is, it would be shortsighted to argue either that these images of subjective journalism are worthy of dismissal or that these images were somehow "more authentic" than others because of reporters' emotionality.¹⁰

Yet, in interesting and unexpected ways, "the local" circulates through a variety of non-news television genres while actual local television news becomes a "user-friendly," "consumer-oriented" source of community information. The appearance of "post-Katrina" programming in non-news genres and the increase in the amount of local television news provided by NBC, CBS, and ABC affiliates (WDSU, WWL-TV, and WGNO, respectively) gave consumers advice about all kinds of concerns, from where to haul trash to how to hire a contractor. Often in direct conflict with news representations offered on their national networks, local television affiliates, as well as print news media such as the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Times-Picayune*, and radio stations such as the new Spanish-language KGLA-AM, Radio Tropical, bear a different kind of witness to life in a "post-Katrina" New Orleans. Local mainstream news sources have been joined by scores of local, national, and international photographers (professional and amateur) and independent videomakers who have also migrated to the region to help narrate, with multiple and perhaps without always clearly articulated motivations, what it is like, and what it has *been* like, to be part of the worst so-called *natural* disaster in U.S. history.¹¹ Indeed, Hurricane Katrina and its aftereffects have provided the content and motivation for creative production and exhibition in a variety of media from a special exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art curated by artist Kara Walker, filmmaker Spike Lee's *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (HBO, 2006), to small galleries in New York's Chelsea, to architectural design competitions focusing on New Orleans housing and held in various cities around the world, to local documentation through amateur and professional photography shows at New Orleans museums, galleries, alternative art spaces, and public after-school programs for children. While mainstream, national news worked to "fix" a grand narrative about Hurricane Katrina, diverse voices, some louder and equipped with more cultural capital than others, serve as counter-narratives to the false "conclusion" provided by the likes of CNN and Fox News.

"I'm a Talk Show Host."

During the week in which *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* celebrated its 500th episode, the host spent several days on a philanthropic/publicity visit to New Orleans. Utilizing her media visibility and celebrity as fundraising tools, DeGeneres raised, through her show, \$10 million that was donated to the Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund. In addition to opening a Quizno's sandwich shop won by New Orleanian Sharon "Shay" Karriem (in collaboration with *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, Quizno's ran a contest in which applicants were awarded a franchise), the host engaged in various publicity appearances and saw "first hand" the devastation caused by the flooding. On location in the Central Business District, DeGeneres and Karriem cut the red ribbon with the talk show host yelling "rebuild New Orleans" into a bullhorn, ala Ty Pennington from *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*. DeGeneres rallied the crowd that then streamed into the shop to purchase sandwiches made by the celebrity host. However, prior to the opening, Karriem gave viewers a personal walk through her neighborhood and flooded home in the Lower 9th Ward. Karriem looked directly into the camera while she said that although "there are parts of the city up and running," that is not the case in the Lower 9th Ward.



Medium Quality (500 Kbps) or High Quality (1000 Kbps)

Each day, from May 17-21, 2006, *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* featured videotaped footage of the host's visit to New Orleans with one day's show devoted entirely to the city's recovery. In an interesting encounter between elite and popular culture and different registers of celebrity, DeGeneres interviewed former Presidents Clinton and Bush, after their Tulane University commencement appearance, about the recovery effort in New Orleans.¹² This informal conversation demonstrated, in obviously affective ways, the degree to which individualized or collective (i.e., non-governmental assistance) can be facilitated or constrained by enormous need. Speaking of how such work generates "good feelings," DeGeneres acknowledged that something more than affectively motivated gestures are needed in order to rebuild New Orleans: "It does feel good to help and even if, on a grassroots level, there are people picking up trash and kids on spring break coming in and it feels good to help, the country is so divided by politics..." DeGeneres suggested that, through the affective frame of "good works," political divisions might be overcome—perhaps a utopian wish, but meaningful nonetheless.

As a former New Orleanian, DeGeneres told Clinton and Bush about an encounter she had with a resident of the Lower 9th Ward, in which she felt powerless to do anything about the situation: "Everybody is asking me to 'do something...' I'm a talk show host. I don't know what to do. How do I tell them—because it's nine months later—and I know the Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund has raised \$100 million and they are saying...we're so grateful for what people are doing." Putting aside the rather disjointed description of her experience, DeGeneres seemed to be articulating a deeper concern that this form of voluntary aid either was not going to be directed in an appropriate way so that it could actually help those who need it most or that, as a mere talk show host, her interventions would appear minimal compared to the efforts of ex-presidents. Indeed, the fact that *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, known more for its fun and games than its

serious cultural commentary, spent one week on the aftermath of Katrina when national news networks and news programs had all but wiped it off their programming priorities is evidence enough of the ways in which ongoing and chronic problems cannot be addressed through conventional news genres. In response to DeGeneres' apparently sincere and affectively rendered question, President Clinton offered a media-savvy response. He suggested that in addition to this one week of programming focusing on the aftermath of Katrina, DeGeneres return to the area in six months and then one year later to represent the changes and to update viewers on the situation.

Lost Signal, Lost Audience

In New Orleans, post-Katrina, it has become commonplace to say that, even in this Mardi Gras, carnivalesque place, everything is topsy-turvy. Old hierarchies, if not eliminated, have been temporarily reversed and new ones have taken their places, while mutually distinct categories have taken on each other's characteristics. Interior is exterior; private, domestic space is public display. Built environments and natural ones tangle in violent and devastating embraces. Streets are rivers. Solid walls are open frames. Even the most intimate material of people's lives (their diaries, family photographs, documents, wedding videos, and underwear) is now unintentional spectacle for passersby. Literally becoming the ground beneath one's feet, the affective material of people's everyday lives is wrenched from one meaningful context and placed, as if by chance, in a very different kind of frame. For example, the *Times-Picayune* newspaper editorial writer Jarvis DeBerry, whose home was destroyed by the flooding, describes this process of inside-outing as a type of public humiliation, a shaming ritual for citizens:

"Stripping away our privacy is one of the many ways Hurricane Katrina humiliated us. We may not have missed a single month's rent, may never have failed to pay the mortgage, and yet, all our worldly possessions still ended up on the curb as if they'd been tossed out by a constable...Everything that was in my drawers, including the drawers I wore. Everything I'd ever bought at the drug store. Old birthday cards. Journals, including some that chronicled my life's most despairing moments. Wine bottles, in-line skates, love letters..."¹³

This reversal effect on conventional categories and hierarchies has also been applied to current media practices, particularly news production in New Orleans. As David Lee Simmons, managing editor of the alternative free-weekly, *Gambit*, has observed, "One of our former freelancers, in one of his first e-mails, said, 'how does it feel to compete with the daily newspaper when the daily newspaper is acting like an alternative news weekly?' And I thought it did speak to a kind of re-energizing that was going on at *The Times-Picayune* after the storm."¹⁴ Simmons and local *Times-Picayune* television columnist Dave Walker, have noted that Hurricane Katrina prompted a revision of local news, its mission and definition, as well as a shift in the perceived needs of the local news audience. While local news media, print and television, have been undergoing significant revision not only in structure but content, interestingly, Nielsen Media Research "packed up its book and left town," but did return to at least partial measuring capacity by February 2006.¹⁵ So, in the meantime, local news was relatively freed from ratings constraints and perhaps better positioned to construct itself as a truer representative of the "people's voice"—an advocate—than it would be if Nielsen were monitoring the area.

In the narrating of the "Katrina story," many national media outlets focused on the heroic actions of small groups of dedicated professionals at the *Times-Picayune* and WWL-TV (CBS affiliate) who used whatever means at their disposal to get the story to the audience. From accounts of reporters and editors at the *Times-Picayune* using household generators to print copies of small editions of the news and hand-delivering the paper to people trapped at the convention center and elsewhere, to stories of reporters who set up WWL-TV in production studios at nearby Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, it is the case that news of local events took on a different level of significance for those people who call New Orleans home. All but one radio station lost their signals (kept broadcasting by virtue of relocating to Baton Rouge, using generators and facilities provided by media giant Clear Channel Communications) and the audience was also lost, or at the very least, displaced. In terms of the "loss of the signal," Mary Ann Doane has observed, "television's greatest technological prowess is its ability to be there—both on the scene and in your living room (hence the most catastrophic of technological catastrophes is the loss of the signal)."¹⁶ Indeed, one of the many tragic features of this catastrophe (and, not coincidentally of September 11, 2001) was that local on-the-ground first responders were unable to communicate with each other, but were able

through various emergency communication technologies to speak to "the nation" while their city and its inhabitants remained uninformed, not spoken to, but spoken about, without food, water, medication, shelter for days. So, along with the loss of a signal (even four years after the hurricane, telephone communication and cable television/internet services are unavailable in certain areas of New Orleans and the surrounding parishes) came an accompanying evacuation of most of the region's population.

Encompassing three Nielsen DMAs, this dislocation of a substantial portion of the region's media market halted conventional audience measuring practices and challenged assumptions about the implications such a geographical shift in demographic groups for those industrial entities dependent upon aggregate numbers for advertising revenue. In New Orleans, not only was the signal lost, but the audience, commodity and otherwise, was either unreachable due to lack of access to television, radio, electricity, or unreadable due to relocation in temporary American Red Cross or other community-based shelters in different cities. Temporarily unable to be surveyed by media measurement devices, the "Katrina audience" remains dispersed, by the hundreds of thousands, in other places as far from New Orleans as Alaska and Maine. It is important to think about the various implications of such a sudden series of demographic shifts, not only for media industries and their abilities to continue to survey, in economic terms, the constitution of particular markets. These series of shifts also have implications for culture and politics as regions, cities, and communities begin to look different in terms of race and class.¹⁷

As various news outlets have reported, entire areas along the gulf coast were destroyed and over one million people were displaced from their homes with as many as 644,500 persons (including three Mississippi counties and five Louisiana parishes) not returning in the days following the storm. To put this in perspective, prior to Hurricane Katrina, this area had a combined population of approximately 1.4 million people. Information gathered and updated monthly from The Brookings Institution and used by Nielsen Media Research in their white paper, "The Demographic Effects of Hurricane Katrina on Designated Market Areas" indicates that the population in the Greater New Orleans metropolitan area has decreased by 25 percent.¹⁸ There have been no official Nielsen ratings in the area since May 2005. This does not mean, though, that Nielsen has not been able to collect data about the "lost" audience. In a way, the temporary suspension of ratings information has provided local network affiliates with an opportunity to re-brand their news product as even more homegrown and consumer-oriented than they were "pre-Katrina." As Mason Granger, WDSU (NBC) president and general manager, said, the lack of ratings-based programming control facilitates an expansion of news and information programming (i.e., with special emphasis on information-based consumer advocacy): "We didn't have an hour of news at noon before the hurricane, and we now have two hours of morning news on Saturdays and three hours of morning news on Sundays, plus the evening newscast that we normally provide."¹⁹ In addition, WDSU has had the programming chutzpah to push back the start of *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* thirty minutes to allow for an extra half-hour of late-night news. *Six On Your Side: Live*, focused on face-to-face interviews with local anchor Norman Robinson and various guests such as historian Douglas Brinkley. Robinson put guests from mayoral candidates, and local authors, to FEMA agents and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers managers in the "hot seat" and asked "tough" questions all in the name of consumer advocacy. A national brand, "on your side" is used by many NBC local news stations and suggests a curious sense in which the usual guiding assumptions about news, that it should remain objective by explicitly avoiding taking sides, are not applicable to local news. As is the case in New Orleans, WDSU promotes itself as an ally to the local community of viewing consumers and even, through its personalization of reporters' and anchors' own Katrina stories, encourages a "we're in this together" discourse that represents news professionals as citizen journalists (part of the community, not apart from it).

Yet, while local television news and other news sources such as radio and newspaper attempted to assert themselves as consumer advocates, the majority of this coverage remained targeted to a decidedly middle-class or affluent viewing audience and tended to either generalize or particularize information to such a degree that complicated relations between interlocking community interest and larger structural problems were simplified. Moreover, as the breach between audience measurement technologies and viewers provides an opportunity to examine how subjectivities and identities such as those of "audiences" are produced *away* from home; it also becomes even more important to ponder what it means when audiences *return*.

If it is the case that the representation and advocacy offered by *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* as well as local news tended to individualize the devastation and offer micro-solutions to macro-level problems, then local video and media artists have filled in the gaps. In the spirit of amplifying and reclaiming local media voices, *Children of the Storm*, a video made with a group of New Orleans schoolchildren who had

just returned home, might not have the sound level of Ellen DeGeneres' bullhorn, but it is powerful nonetheless. Produced under the supervision of Betsy Weiss, an award-winning New Orleans video artist and educator, *Children of the Storm* is the result of a joint program through New Orleans Video Access Center and several New Orleans schools. The video won "Best Short" at The New Orleans International Human Rights Film Festival held in New Orleans in May, 2006. In the months following the opening of a few schools in the city, Weiss worked with New Orleans Video Access Center (the oldest community-based video production center in the U.S.) and a local after-school program to teach junior high school students to use video to tell their own evacuation stories.²⁰

A brief yet powerful video, *Children of the Storm* represents several different communities and neighborhoods as a group of African American schoolchildren from New Orleans use the camera themselves to interview each other about their experiences. Interspersed with direct address to the camera are examples of the children's artwork that includes depictions of flooded homes, roof rescues, drowning people, cars bumper-to-bumper on the highways. These images are accompanied by the individual children's narratives that represent larger community concern in which the experience of one child merges into the next. It is particularly significant, I suggest, that the production context for *Children of the Storm* is an after-school program in an educational system that, before the storm, had few material resources and, after the storm, has even less. Yet, by virtue of their being part of a community-based after school program and by virtue of sharing the experience of evacuation, these students made leaps of connection between the individual and the community that more sophisticated media either shied away from or ignored altogether.

All of the children who participated in *Children of the Storm* discuss their individual experiences, each different, of leaving the city, while they also describe daily life after returning to New Orleans, and their desire for familiar things. They discuss the struggles of evacuation, in which at least two children witnessed the deaths of other people (some family members, some strangers), and their ways of adjusting to life back in their hometown. In the absence of friends, neighbors, extended families, familiar schoolteachers, etc., the children describe how they and their parents or guardians are coping with day-to-day problems like the lack of housing and complicated issues such as the government's (state and national) response to the disaster. At one point, Donald, age 13, responds to this question: "How do you feel about being back in New Orleans?" He describes his return experience and says eloquently what other mass media outlets have not in relation to housing, life in New Orleans post-Katrina, and the role of community:

"I think that most of the land is going to be sold and most people will come back, but not a lot right now because the prices for the houses are up high. People ain't going to come back if the prices are too high, so I really don't know. Well, I think they need to build back the school system, rebuild everything, need to rebuild the people. Try to be united again. You just can't build a house with one person; you need more people to build a house. We need people back, but we need to be treated the way we were treated before the hurricane."

Donald acknowledges that in order for New Orleans to recover from the disaster, more sustained and community-wide support is necessary. While the individualized gestures offered by Ellen DeGeneres and the Quiznos collaboration surely benefits a few people just as individual families benefit from the "good works" of Ty Pennington and his teams on ABC's *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, these fixes are like filling broken levees with sand bags. The kind of sustained national intervention that is required in New Orleans and the Gulf South cannot be represented, or even advocated, through national media discourse—at least not in conventional news genres or even in "special issue" themes such as *The Ellen DeGeneres Show's* week-long focus on the city and its citizens.

Comment on this article

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Endnotes

1 A result of the material conditions in which the author found herself once she evacuated New Orleans (without access to VCR, DVD recorder, etc.), this essay looks at local news and other media texts "post-Katrina."

2 "Remarks By President Bush During Briefing on Hurricane Katrina," PR Newswire, September 2, 2005. <http://www.prnewswire.com>. (Accessed August 15, 2009)

3 "Remarks."

4 Richard W. Stevenson, et al., "Hurricane Katrina: Federal Response," *New York Times*, August 31, 2005.

5 Marita Sturken, "Weather Media and Homeland Security: Selling Preparedness in a Volatile World," *Understanding Katrina* (Social Science Research Council). <http://www.understandingkatrina.ssrc.org/Sturken> (Accessed August 8, 2006).

6 John M. Barry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How it Changed America*. New York: William Morrow, 2006, 21.

7 Tara McPherson, "Feeling Blue: Katrina, The South, and The Nation," *Flow*, Volume 3, Issue 4, May 20, 2006. <http://flowtv.org/?p=267>. (Accessed April 4, 2009).

8 Christopher Drew, "Drug Problems Escalate After Hurricane Katrina," *New York Times*, August 5, 2006. <http://www.nytimes.com> (Accessed August 15, 2009).

9 Perhaps one way of accounting for the vigorous attempts of studio-based male anchors to counter the stories of field reporters (mostly men, with some exceptions) is to think about how this affective display may have worked in relation to gender, producing a *feminization* of the news. See also Steve Classen's attendant essay in this journal.

10 The same critique could be made of the practice of "embedding" journalists among military units (U.S. or, most recently, Israeli military). With "embedded" journalists the assumption is that the images and narratives are more "real" while the opposite seemed to be the case with reporters on the scene in New Orleans. Located on the streets of New Orleans, reporters were more likely to be dismissed by network anchors, at least by CNN and Fox News anchors, as biased by their own involvement than any embedded military reporter.

11 As Kumkum Sangari has noted, the "natural disaster is located in the space of the alibi" such that any invocation of "the natural" serves as a means of dismissing man-made contributions to the event or series of events. Plenary remarks, "Media Disasters," (Console-ing Passions Conference, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, May 2006).

12 DeGeneres spoke to Presidents Clinton and Bush at Kingsley House, the South's oldest Settlement House. Before Katrina, "Kingsley House served 7,500 people in Greater New Orleans ages 0 to 100 through a variety of programs, including early Head Start, and preschool Head Start" and other programs including an adult daycare center. Child Welfare League of America. "Answering the Call for Help," (<http://www.cwla.org/Katrina/memberupdates/kingsleyhouse2.htm>. Accessed August 15, 2008).

13 Jarvis DeBerry, "Our Innermost Selves, Strewn on the Curb." *Times-Picayune*. April 11, 2006, B-7.

14 Brook Gladstone and Jamie York, "Après le Déluge, Media." *On the Media*, National Public Radio, April 28, 2006.

15 Gladstone, 2006.

16 Mary Ann Doane, "Information, Crisis, Catastrophe," in *Logics of Television*, ed. Patricia Mellencamp, 222-239 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

17 See, for example, "The Latino South: In Georgia, Immigrants Unsettle Old Sense of Place." Swarns, Rachel L. *The New York Times*, August 4, 2006. www.nytimes.com. Accessed August 4, 2006.

18 Hal Reid, "Katrina Demographics—A Claritas Assessment of Change," *Directions Magazine*, April 18, 2006. http://www.directionsmag.com/article.php?article_id=2139. Accessed August 20, 2009.

19 Gladstone, 2006.

20 The schools (all charter schools) participating in the video include: New Orleans Math and Science Charter High School, Sophie B. Wright Charter School, and Capdau Charter School.

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