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## **Scholars Off the Page**

**3. Diane Negra reads from**

***Old and New Media After Katrina*  
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## *Old and New Media After Katrina*

Diane Negra (ed.)

### INTRODUCTION: OLD AND NEW MEDIA AFTER KATRINA

*Old and New Media After Katrina* considers the media textuality of Hurricane Katrina, an event that signifies the radical eruption of incidents and images decisively outside the bounds of what is conceived as the American “way of life.”<sup>1</sup> In its aftermath we can glimpse the ways in which citizenship, consumerism and charity come together in new formulations, often in attempts to reinforce state-sponsored Christian sanctimony, the stigmatization of the poor and the need to negotiate white middle-class guilt in such a way that national identity myths remain unthreatened. For many, Hurricane Katrina manifested not only a profoundly unequal national culture and the rupture of the social contract, it also seemed to lay bare the normalization of risk in American life.

Representations of Hurricane Katrina cannot be read outside of a neoliberal context marked by “New Economy” market fundamentalism, state-supported assaults on the environment, intense anti-immigration rhetoric in a nation still celebrating itself as a global beacon of hope for the downtrodden, the withering role of state care for the vulnerable, and various other perversions of democracy that have flourished in recent years. Hurricane Katrina is positioned at the intersection of numerous early twenty-first century crisis narratives centralizing contemporary uncertainties about race, class, region, government and public safety.

Nancy Tuana has observed that “A city is a complex material-semiotic interaction, and New Orleans rests at the heart of multiple interactions.”<sup>2</sup> In the context of the history of US imperialism, New Orleans may be seen to have functioned as an internal colonial locale where the tensions of slavery, environmental exploitation and economic exhaustion suffused urban identity well prior to Hurricane Katrina. The city has long maintained a distinctive status within the national imaginary, its “Old South” qualities enriched and particularized by Cajun and Creole influences that have been interpreted as local “spice” or in reference to the supernatural. Many of its contemporary Hollywood film representations draw upon and further such perceptions, often featuring intense, transgressive eroticism (I have in mind here films like *Obsession* [1976], *Angel Heart* [1987], *Wild at Heart* [1990], *Interview with the Vampire* [1994]) or the romanticization of corruption. In a film such as *The Big Easy* (1987) the local population is paradoxically represented as both criminal and compliant. Outside of a grisly murder scene an unruly mob of local citizens gathers, but their political concerns quickly dissipate in the face of an opportunity for recreation. “The riot has turned into a party,” a fellow cop tells police detective Remy McSwain, who responds “I love this town.” Once we understand such representations as emerging from the need to manage colonial/imperial histories we can

more fully track the ambivalences at play in New Orleans' frequent depiction as resolutely, perversely local in an era of globalized connectivity.

Prior to Katrina, New Orleans maintained a singular status within an economy of carefully marketed lifestyle and tourism destinations. More than most cities, it sustained an urban brand conceptualized from the perspective of the non-resident and divorced from the daily experiences of average citizens.

Once primarily seen as a place where European-American cultural affinities lived on and a "Caribbeanized" site of flamboyance, multiculturalism and multiracialism, New Orleans was understood by many as a city whose economically anachronistic status was barely compensated for by tourism. The city's historical and contemporary associations with gambling also dovetail with new narratives of risk as a feature of the national condition.<sup>3</sup> Geographical vulnerability (but equally important racial, class and financial vulnerability) constituted a key disclosure of the events of 2005. Moreover, Hurricane Katrina reverberates in a culture where so many everyday encounters are now tinged with risk, terror, anger and competition; the increasingly authoritarian and majoritarian American emotional and financial culture as well as the possibility of alternatives to it could be starkly glimpsed in popular debates about whether New Orleans "deserves" to recover and whether its displaced population can be said to have the right of return. The inability to perceive issues of disability and ill health as constitutive elements of the vulnerability of many of those impacted by Katrina can be understood in part as a consequence of the "livestrong or die" mindset of heath triumphalism that has flourished in America in recent years, underwriting deeply classist pathways of access to medical care.

In the early twenty-first century the narrative of dead, dying or injured cities is sometimes counter-balanced by the spectacle of civic rejuvenation, philanthropy, and volunteerism (nearly always on terms that accord with dominant ideological keynotes and gender, race and class hierarchies). But the effort of re-building itself is open to commodification as may be seen in an entry in the long-running, high profile advertising campaign for flavored Absolut vodkas. "Absolut New Orleans" features a clogged highway lane going into the city with the Superdome in the background – in such a way urban rejuvenation is fused with "local spice," and the promotion of a new Absolut product, a mango and black-pepper vodka.

In a study of consumerism and kitsch in relation to 9/11 and the Oklahoma City bombing, Marita Sturken has persuasively argued that contemporary American culture processes traumatic episodes of violence through the "tourism of history."<sup>4</sup> Effectively, souvenirs and trinkets, reenactment practices, museum displays and a consumerist popular culture steer the meaning of such events in patriotically sentimentalized and ideologically neutralized directions. While Sturken's arguments are surely applicable in many ways to the commodification of disaster in New Orleans, they also need to be re-cast in this context, given that the unifying rhetoric of "homeland" upon which such consumer memorialization depends proved dramatically inapplicable to an event in which a majority of citizens found the government to be at fault. Among the other deeply

destabilizing effects of Katrina, as Carol A. Stabile has noted, was the witnessing by many citizens “for the first time in decades the effects of racism and economic despair exacerbated by the undermining of public infrastructures in the United States.” For such viewer citizens “evidence of the government’s abandonment of New Orleans threatened to overwhelm their sense of self and place.”<sup>5</sup> Stabile’s apt observation underscores the vital importance of spectatorship, not only in the context of what became a mediathon of television coverage in September, 2005, but in the numerous ways in which Katrina’s legacy appears in a range of other media forms for Hurricane Katrina remains a cultural event strikingly difficult to access independent of its media representations. As Aric Mayer has observed, “To put the national Hurricane Katrina experience in perspective, fewer than several hundred thousand people witnessed the storm in person. For the other 99.8 percent of Americans, the disaster was a media experience with lasting implications for the public opinion and action.”<sup>6</sup>

This collection of essays explores the relationship between Hurricane Katrina and a range of media forms, assessing how mainstream and independent media have responded (sometimes innovatively, sometimes conservatively) to the political and social ruptures “Katrina” has come to represent. Strikingly, some media coverage in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina neglected to adhere to established protocols and conventions.<sup>7</sup> In certain instances this material challenged assumptions about the malfeasance of those in poverty and of an always already criminal blackness. Some of the most dramatic evidence of such coverage could be seen on heavily conservative Fox News where anomalies occasionally began to crop up in the rote call and response systems between news studios and on-site personnel. Instead of validating a view of the situation shaped in the studio and according to ideological prescription, reporters such as Fox’s Shepard Smith refuted anchors’ attempts to recuperate events on the ground or to validate blatantly inadequate efforts at care provision for those impacted in New Orleans.

Musician Kanye West’s dramatic “off-script” moment during a September 2, 2005 broadcast of the benefit *A Concert for Hurricane Relief* where West protested the racial disparity between black citizens accounted as “looters” and white ones deemed “supply gatherers” and bluntly asserted that “George Bush doesn’t care about black people” furthered public awareness that in the period after Katrina dissenting voices were making their way into the media mainstream. Such moments of unruly subjectivity were not frequent but they tended to harden in public memory and conveyed an ideologically contestatory mood and tone. It is the argument of this book that after an initial frenzy of media coverage, efforts to impose conservative representational discipline over an event deemed ideologically problematic have played out over a sustained period of time.<sup>8</sup>

Emblematic of succeeding efforts to impose social and representational order in a fast-changing environment was a broadcast of the reality crime series *America’s Most Wanted* on September 10, 2005. Situating its longtime host John Walsh in New Orleans, the episode opened with a stark assertion of its own relevance, “our nineteenth season on the air kicks off with one of our biggest jobs. . . our mission to find the missing.” Despite such rhetoric, close examination of the episode reveals that this “mission” is decidedly minimized in favor of the show’s stock gambit of criminal apprehension. The broadcast

insistently advocates on behalf of police, military and rescue agencies, acknowledging neglect and disorder only to the minimum extent necessary and extolling that “there are stories of lawlessness and sin that erupted after the storm passed, but the bigger story is that compassion and kindness flowed like the Mississippi River” (the inappropriateness of such watery metaphors did not, apparently, register with series producers).<sup>9</sup> While using short segments of the show’s national broadcast platform to allow separated family members to announce their locations on-air, the primary mandate of the special “Gulf Coast Recovery” episode is to stage criminal detection as social recovery. Accordingly the broadcast included a lengthy appeal to apprehend criminals who posed as building contractors in post-Hurricane Andrew Florida, a profile of Mississippi police officers whose homes were flooded, introductions of police officers from other parts of the country who traveled to the Gulf region to help and the exhortation to help find two prison inmates who escaped incarceration after the storm. As Walsh puts it, “While the Mississippi police are helping their towns recover from the hurricane, you can help them by keeping an eye out for a few of their most wanted fugitives.”

Aric Mayer has observed that despite the frenetic coverage accorded to it early on, post-Katrina New Orleans was a site “which seemed to defy and elude the available means of media representation,”<sup>10</sup> and I would argue that this unrepresentability produced a kind of unfinished agenda that lingered after the intense, immediate first phase of media coverage came to an end. It is this “unfinished business” that generates a particular representational urgency around Katrina and that a variety of media forms have subsequently addressed in the past five years. A chief goal of these essays is to consider the ways in which Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath have/have not precipitated revision of the narrative and ideological codes of popular film and television. Do cataclysmic national events exert narrative pressure on even the most stable genres? Are certain film and television forms subject to change and contestation when representing the disaster or have standard codes and conventions proven resilient enough to evade modification in the face of the ideological/cultural exposure Hurricane Katrina has come to represent? While some contributors to this book find that a post-Katrina representational environment gives rise to programming innovations (as Andrew Goodridge argues of the cluster of Discovery Channel survivalist nature-reality hybrid series including *Survorman*, *Man vs. Wild* and *I Shouldn’t Be Alive* all of which come to television in the immediate aftermath of Katrina) others assess textual forms as varied as the romantic comedy or the National Public Radio broadcast that seem to cling doggedly to their established formulae even as the revelations of Katrina make many of their ideological precepts untenable.<sup>11</sup> A strong tendency in media representations related to Hurricane Katrina is the ascription of blame and even moral deficiency to the residents of New Orleans rather than to government agencies or corporate interests as Lindsay Steenberg shows in her discussion of the frequently punitive treatment accorded to Katrina-impacted guest characters on prime time tv. Another common approach is to hype individual rejuvenation as a substitute for civic rejuvenation – a consistent device to effect this substitution is the personal or home makeover. In her essay Brenda Weber considers the relationships in place between the Katrina legacy and the makeover as a primary televisual mode of the early 2000s.

As the foregoing examples suggest, the specific texts analyzed by the contributors to this book roam widely across forms and genres. Case studies will traverse a range of texts from chick flicks like *Last Holiday*, documentaries such as *When the Levees Broke* and *Trouble the Water* and Katrina-themed episodes of prime-time television series such as *House*, *Bones*, and *Law & Order SVU*, to the landscape of cable news and the making of news personalities like CNN's Anderson Cooper (for whom Katrina was a professional boon, perhaps the only high-profile white male public figure of whom this could be said) and disaster-themed programming on outlets like the National Geographic and Weather Channels.

Although they do not come in for specific examination in this book, it is worth noting the emergence of a cluster of post-Katrina, Louisiana-set horror films including *Hatchet* and *The Reaping* which seem to process the horrors of 2005 in displaced forms and the appearance of film and tv series that conceptualize New Orleans as a site for communal and personal campaigns for justice and crime-solving (notably *Déjà Vu* and the Fox drama *K-Ville*). In general, media texts that have straightforwardly sought to adapt 9/11 style discourses of heroic "law and order-ism" to a post-Katrina context have failed to muster critical approval or to stir audience interest. This has proven true for television series like *K-Ville* which sought (with the cooperation of the NOPD) to celebrate fictional New Orleans police officers and for films like *Déjà Vu* which crudely and desperately spins a terrorist plot to impose the agenda of "homeland security" in New Orleans, opening with a spectacular sequence in which a ferry carrying hundreds of navy personnel and their families (and sailing under a banner that reads "Katrina Only Made Us Stronger") is bombed on Fat Tuesday. One of the earliest post-Katrina films with a New Orleans setting, *Déjà Vu* elides the realities of hurricane devastation by re-designating New Orleans as an investigative homeland space. By contrast, *Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans*, about a police officer and former Katrina "hero" who becomes decadently corrupt was generally positively critically assessed and pronounced a significant creative achievement for its star Nicolas Cage.

The proximity between Hurricane Katrina, the Indian Ocean Tsunami of December, 2004 and the commercial success of Davis Guggenheim's acclaimed documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* in 2006 moved public awareness of environmental disaster into the cultural foreground and arguably intensified a pre-existing cultural posture normalizing the permanency of disaster. One issue under examination in this book is how Katrina-related media at times adhere to and at times disrupt the tradition of Hollywood films (including examples such as *Dante's Peak*, *Deep Impact*, *War of the Worlds* and *2012*) that take disaster as an opportunity to re-constitute the family.

Media responses to Katrina are more generically dispersed and thematically oblique than has been recognized. In this context it is crucial to understand Katrina as a media event whose meanings have been consistently fostered and furthered through the Internet. Bearing in mind the important part played by the Internet to virtually reassemble decimated communities, friends and peer groups after the storm, there is also considerable attention paid here to new media and the disparate textual material articulating the significance of the hurricane. Katrina-related YouTube content includes

dramatic survivor videos such as those uploaded by the Guerra and Vaccarella families, memorials, survivor testimonials such as *The Truth About Hurricane Katrina*, urban video tours of decimated neighborhoods, and political calls to action. In this way, the site (launched just two months before the devastation of New Orleans) has come to serve as an “accidental cultural archive” and potentially as an “enabler of encounters with cultural differences and the development of political ‘listening’ across belief systems and identities.”<sup>12</sup> In his essay for this volume Jeff Scheible turns to a set of more diffuse and less direct iterations, analyzing Katrina’s online presence as a means of better delineating the time and space associated with it.

Although it is not focused on in a sustained way in this book, it is important to acknowledge the scope and influence of a Katrina-influenced material culture -- in this context we might consider for instance the early flexibility of merchandising protocols in New Orleans’ French Quarter that would seem to indicate that even vast civic trauma can be rapidly commodified. T-shirts on sale in 2006 in the Quarter with such slogans as “NOPD (Not Our Problem Dude)” and “I Survived Hurricane Katrina and All I Got Was this Lousy T-Shirt (And a Plasma TV, and A DVD Player, etc. etc.)” indicate something of the way that subjects such as police abandonment and looting can be transformed (though not without ambivalence) into commercial humor. More recently fleur-de-lis t-shirts and those reading “Be a New Orleanian Wherever You Are” and Mayor Nagin keychains (such as the kind discussed in this book by Maria Pramaggiore) indicate the ongoing scope of Katrina-related material culture and merchandising.

In his essay Dan Streible documents the case of murdered filmmaker Helen Hill, whose creative work was materially damaged by the flooding in 2005. Through Streible’s account, we gain a closer view of the activities of film restoration, the contours of an activist life and the ways in which New Orleans has so often operated as cultural host for off the grid creative activities. A significant strand interweaving among the essays in this book involves analysis of the role of media not only in organizing public memory of Katrina but in shaping/directing affective responses to it. For example, in her essay Maria Pramaggiore examines the ways that the reflexive “anniversarizing” of Katrina on media outlets such as National Public Radio has helped to shape emotional responses to the disaster, privileging sentimentality and recollection over introspection or analysis.

A consistent element in the essays that comprise this collection is the recognition that while Katrina represented an anomalous event in some respects, it has generally been made to conform very heavily to pre-existing and ongoing narrative and ideological patterns. Its media presentation for instance adheres to an increasingly consistent US regionalization of value and morality. These sorts of dynamics are evident in the contemporary disaster film which from *Independence Day* to *Cloverfield* has proven itself deeply invested in staging the loss of certain cities in the process of defending/reclaiming the nation. Such cities are often dubbed collateral damage of a kind in a US that must contend against new and unprecedented threats. The broader habit of differentiating which national zones are economically/ideologically vital and which are quiescent begs the question of what kinds of “ruin” we are recognizing in the destruction

of New Orleans.<sup>13</sup> and further invites analysis of whether/how the ruining of cities is emerging as a premiere twenty-first century American scenario of fear and fantasy.

In the twentieth century the US accumulated little historical experience of re-building after large-scale destruction. It did however gain considerable experience of repressing the unmaking of such American cities as Detroit, Newark, Providence and Baltimore, all of which saw local economies and industries dwindle away. Given the cultural proclivity in the US to trade in competitive strength/weakness dialectics, it is not surprising that a strong impulse is to expel faltering cities as damaged parts of the national body. A “boom town” logic helps to compensate for these losses as Americans are urged to migrate to new urban centers where prospects seem bright. In the last twenty years, dramas of competitive regionalism have tended to celebrate particular cities or regions as magnet sites – Seattle, Austin and Las Vegas among others have consistently come in for this sort of mythologizing treatment. With formulations such as these in place, the economic deterioration of some cities and regions is eclipsed by the celebration of chic new urban lifestyle centers. In an era of habitual state underfunding and competitive regionalism Katrina as a cultural event exposes an intensely hierarchical, disaggregated notion of national identity.

In the drama of expendability that has frequently been staged around New Orleans since 2005, we can see the consolidation and amplification of elements that were already in place prior to Katrina. A once prosperous and thriving city, New Orleans had entered a period of long decline and was widely understood to be economically obsolescent even as other “sunbelt” cities like Atlanta, Charlotte and Las Vegas thrived and expanded. Commercial activity outside the city’s Central Business District was sluggish and New Orleans experienced little of the gentrification Neil Smith has identified as crucial to the branding of twenty-first century urban milieux.<sup>14</sup> Even as the US economy surged in the late 1990s and early 2000s New Orleans was figured in many respects as an anomalous space, a socially and financially decrepit city that had been “left behind” in the rush toward hypercapitalist development and financial speculation. In such accounts New Orleans is understood as the site of a culture that is unable/unwilling to change (or to change in the right ways). This rhetoric of left behindness” is apparent for instance in Richard Florida’s account of the regionalization of class and creativity in which he designates New Orleans as one of several regions “being bypassed in the shift to the Creative Economy.” Cities such as Buffalo, Grand Rapids, Greensboro and New Orleans, Florida maintains, “are being left almost totally behind in this process.”<sup>15</sup>

Hurricane Katrina, I suggest, is significant for its uncanny enactment of the “left behind” trope, a trope that emerges largely out of a high-profile series of Christian novels and films but which can be more usefully re-purposed to conceptualize the social and material consequences of radical inequality in early twenty first century America. What I’m arguing here is that Katrina lays bare a set of necropolitical relations (that is to say relations between the power of the state and the power over life and death) at work in the twenty-first century United States. Katrina texts work to suppress or activate those relations, sometimes in unexpected ways. Further traces of the association between Hurricane Katrina, social abandonment and contemporary necropolitics can be glimpsed



in *Left 4 Dead 2*, the cooperative first-person shooter game launched for Microsoft Windows and Xbox in November, 2009, in which the zombie-killing fight for survival after an apocalyptic pandemic culminates in New Orleans.

Left behindness as it was broadly constituted in American economic and social discourses of the early millennium is, of course, fully implicated with neoliberal self-reliance. Such rhetorical/ideological systems maintain absolute adherence to a national narrative of ongoing progress in which citizens are imagined as simply choosing to take part or not. National disapproval of New Orleans post-Katrina has consistently caricatured its “do-nothing” citizens, relying upon neoliberal discourses of self-sufficiency and studious avoidance of structural features that produce social vulnerability.<sup>16</sup> Andrew Rojecki has aptly noted the “absence of a vigorous discussion in the mass media on the possibility and desirability of rebuilding New Orleans and protecting it from future flooding.”<sup>17</sup> In Rojecki’s comparative study of print and media responses to the Great Flood of 1927 and to Katrina he finds that one of the most striking features of the news coverage of Hurricane Katrina was a distinct lack of a sense of national common cause with those impacted. In addition to a “them not us” formulation, the contemporary event moreover was often discursively linked to fatalism, religion and scientific superficiality. The cultural event of Katrina in many ways confounded positive spin, laying bare a national culture in thrall to socially destructive forms of capitalism that privatized gains and socialized losses.

Several years on now, public opinion seems if anything to have hardened against New Orleans; its politicians and its population are frequently characterized using the now-familiar rhetoric of the political right which re-writes social/economic vulnerability as a failure of citizenship. Indeed, one of the most striking features of Katrina-related public discourse is the consistent expression of condemnation, umbrage and distaste toward storm victims. Posted comments on follow-up news coverage (which often express deep hostility toward the residents of New Orleans) seemingly give credence to Barbara Ehrenreich’s notion of an “empathy deficit” in contemporary US culture.<sup>18</sup> For Ehrenreich, a cultural climate stressing the social obligation to display positive thinking belies a deep and widespread sense of helplessness in American life.<sup>19</sup>

The emphatically negative assessments so conspicuous in post-Katrina rhetoric also trade in part on the remnants of a very old idea that would seem to be intrinsic to American logics of capital -- the concept of “creative destruction,” in which as Kevin Rozario has pointed out disasters are framed as “events that transform space in ways that promote economic expansion and present (some) investors and businesses with opportunities for the accumulation of capital.”<sup>20</sup> As Rozario contends, the combination of Puritan dogma, nation-building ideologies and unfettered capitalism helped to produce an American tendency (evident as early as 1727 in responses to a New England earthquake) to interpret disaster in opportunistic ways. Yet by the early twenty-first century this interpretive rubric had substantially broken down – when Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans the gaping hole in the landscape of lower Manhattan that had come to be known as “Ground Zero” was still starkly apparent. Writing prior to 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, Rozario would observe that at the dawn of the twenty-first century “old optimisms about

the benefits of disaster are finally wearing thin.”<sup>21</sup> Even so, faint traces of a centuries-old American expectation that calamities could be beneficial may play a part in the censure of New Orleans citizens after the levees broke. This sort of thinking is also apparent in a film like *Last Holiday*, a Queen Latifah star vehicle which as I discuss in this volume, anchors a fantasy of entrepreneurial success in an economically purified post-Katrina New Orleans.

Many of the essays in this collection examine the ways that fiction and non-fiction media forms conceptualize/challenge a view of those impacted by the storm as deviant or deficient citizens, members of a “left behind” remnant public. Toward this end, virtually all of the contributors engage with neoliberalism as a key explanatory framework for the representational practices associated with Katrina. This does not mean that they all reach the same conclusions and while some see the media genres or forms they assess fitting within that framework, in other cases they are deemed to exceed or resist it. It is in this context for instance that Jane Elliott examines paradoxical representations of self-preservation in two documentary films and an episode of television medical drama *House*.

This collection will examine, then, the ways that Katrina was experienced by so many in mediated form as well as the afterlife of the storm and its locales in media imagery. It undertakes such analysis at a time when press accounts are hyping Louisiana’s accumulating track record as a site of media production, with a record number of films and television series being filmed statewide (in part due to a set of tax incentives first established in 2002) and Louisiana seemingly a particular point of attraction for television “auteurs” like David Simon (currently in production on *Treme*) and Alan Ball. The expansion of media production has been extolled as a “silver lining” to the catastrophe of the storm and as a form of potential economic salvation in the region.<sup>22</sup> Yet even as a growing number of productions bid for local verisimilitude, many carefully (even elaborately) negotiate the traumatic residue of the storm. HBO’s Louisiana-set (though only partly Louisiana-filmed) *True Blood* makes a brief reference to Katrina in its pilot but its setting in small-town Bon Temps is (officially) untouched by the storm.<sup>23</sup> In its cursory engagement with Katrina and “Bon Temps” locale, *True Blood* generates the fantasy that the hurricane represents a one-time interruption of the status quo with minimal impact on white hegemony and traditionalist communities. Through its “Bon Temps” setting moreover the series references the promise of ongoing leisure and an uninterrupted way of life in the slogan long associated with New Orleans: “Laissez les bon temps rouler.” Its first season episodic development playing out in a world free of impact from Katrina, *True Blood* prefers to trade in well-established conventions associating the Deep South with gothic-tinged horror.<sup>24</sup> Yet its intensely romantic localism diverts attention away from a contemporary intensification of regional inequalities (demonstrable in widening regional gaps in mortality rates, etc.) and is linked to a pattern of historical detours that seems to be accumulating in post-Katrina media.

Disney’s animated feature *The Princess and the Frog* (which I discuss at greater length in this volume) for instance finds it convenient to construct New Orleans as Jazz Age phantasmagoria, its “Old New Orleans” setting bespeaks a tendency to evade a

problematic contemporary urban locale by foregrounding romantic history (in the form of an African-American princess, jazz-playing alligator and voodoo priestess fairy godmother). The film's impulse to stage a compensatory dreamland that substitutes "Old South" clichés for present-day realities culminates in the trailer's audacious last dialogue line "Dreams do Come True in New Orleans."<sup>25</sup> This is not to suggest that all recent New Orleans-set media texts are so historically and ideologically evasive. In the Academy Award-nominated *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* an F. Scott Fitzgerald short story is distinctively adapted to acknowledge the Katrina context. The film celebrates pre-Katrina New Orleans as a site where human strength and emotional tranquility are connected to coastal culture and as a city culturally receptive to the "curious," construed in the film as counter-hegemonic experiences of temporality, linearity and history. In this sense, and despite its adherence to a problematic limited racial economy in which such experiences of civic richness are available only to white characters that limits its ideological authority and narrative effectiveness, the film stands out among post-Katrina media texts for its humane vision.

*Old and New Media After Katrina* considers media discourse about citizenship in the wake of the storm particularly the ongoing effort of mainstream US media to sort citizens into victims, criminals and heroes. Where 9/11 speedily and durably installed a set of themes and archetypes of cultural heroism that helped to inscribe a narrative of worthy self-sacrifice and barbaric terrorism, the events associated with Katrina, although they did indeed generate a range of heroic actions, did not lead to the lionization of particular individuals or groups. Explanations for this are surely rooted in if not limited to the fact that in the latter instance those most conspicuously impacted were the black urban poor rather than white professionals. As a number of critics have observed, 9/11 coverage tended to prefer suburban breadwinners and an intensely re-valORIZED class of white male firefighters and police officers, in many cases conferring upon them the status of martyrs.<sup>26</sup> It is perhaps also noteworthy that most 9/11 victims were killed while at work or going to it while Katrina victims died in the homes they were perceived to have fully "chosen" to stay in. In this way 9/11 victims were emphatically linked to the idealized daily rhythms of American capitalism and seats of financial and governmental power while Katrina victims were presented in compliance with a set of pre-existing stereotypes about the idle urban poor in a city where "black gangsterism" was understood to thrive. In many respects, then, Katrina can be seen as an event that punctured 9/11 mythologies and unraveled many of its associated certitudes.

*Old and New Media After Katrina* is finally a book about loss (at personal, civic and national levels). Among other things, it takes part in a cultural/academic trend toward the study of disaster (and often its heavily mediated character). Such study is increasingly recognized as central to the thoughtful experience of citizenship in the early twenty-first century.

While a growing body of scholarship addressing Hurricane Katrina and its social outcomes has emerged from disciplines such as sociology, urban studies and Cultural Studies in recent years, most academic studies at this point note the mass mediated character of this cultural event without really analyzing it. As illustrated by the summer

2008 mediathon hyping anxious anticipation for Hurricane Gustav (in which several New Orleans area levees were overtopped but none breached) the need for symbolic eradication of Katrina traumas persists and the legacy of the 2005 events is still very much with us, politically, economically, socially and ideologically. This collection seeks to provide a timely and intellectually fruitful assessment of the complex ways in which media forms and national events are currently entangled and to address readers interested in, provoked by and concerned about the culture of media spectacle, the bifurcation of wealth and social health in America, and the parlous status of early twenty-first century American democracy.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> I am aware of the inadequacy of the term “Hurricane Katrina” but have elected to retain it for clarity. Some critics prefer terms such as the “Katrina circumstances” or “Katrina Event.” Nicole Fleetwood for example (and Lindsay Steenberg in this volume following her usage) employs the latter term to describe not only the storm and the floods, but “the material and social impact of the storm, as well as the complex set of social, technological, and economic narratives and processes reported by the news media.” “Failing Narratives, Initiating Technologies: Hurricane Katrina and the Production of a Weather Media Event,” *American Quarterly* 58(3) (2006) p. 768.

<sup>2</sup> “Viscous Porosity, Witnessing Katrina,” in *Material Feminisms* ed. Stacy Alaimo & Susan Hekman, Bloomington: Indiana U P, 2008, p. 195.

<sup>3</sup> See Randy Martin’s *An Empire of Indifference: American War and the Financial Logic of Risk Management* (Durham: Duke U P, 2007) where he distinguishes between a privileged class marked by its ability to take risks with capital and an underclass deemed to be perpetually “at risk.”

<sup>4</sup> See *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero* Durham: Duke U P, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> “No Shelter from the Storm,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106(4) (Fall, 2007) p. 684.

<sup>6</sup> “Aesthetics of Catastrophe,” *Public Culture: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Transnational Cultural Studies* 20(2) (Spring, 2008) p. 179.

<sup>7</sup> It is worth bearing in mind that until the levees broke, Hurricane Katrina was being assiduously covered in the national media according to the sensationalist protocols of contemporary weather coverage. In “TV in the Season of Compassion Fatigue,” (*FlowTV* 3(4), 2005) I wrote about watching The Weather Channel coverage of New Orleans with other evacuees as Katrina came ashore. Even a group with profound personal and material investments in the city maintained a striking initial adherence to viewing protocols that inscribe titillation and thrill in the coverage of destructive weather events. Among the functions of such coverage is the normalization of features of daily life in the U.S. that might otherwise be subject to scrutiny including lengthy car commutes (often in the absence of mass transportation options), exceptionally high rates of home ownership, diminished property insurance coverage and a repertoire of consuming behaviors that are called forth as privileged acts of citizenship in intense or unusual weather conditions. Andrew Ross reads weather coverage in light of many of these concerns in “The Drought This Time” in *Strange Weather: Culture, Science and Technology in the Age of Limits* (New York: Verso, 1991). His interest is in “the way in which the weather is used to naturalize the social” (237) and “a social history in which ‘the weather’ has been shaped and appropriated by various state and commercial interests.” (228).

<sup>8</sup> Though I hasten to add that forms of visual culture outside the mainstream often work differently as Joy Fuqua shows in her essay for this volume analyzing two visual artists whose installations specifically redress the positioning of storm victims as extra-national “refugees,” and look to forge specific ideological and affective links between the post-Katrina Gulf Coast and post-9/11 New York.

<sup>9</sup> A similar obliviousness is illustrated when Walsh tells a U.S. marshal during the broadcast that “You guys are doing a heck of a job,” and then repeats this phrasing at the close of the episode. The phrase “heck of a

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job” had of course entered popular consciousness as shorthand for the callousness, cronyism and ineptitude of the Bush administration when President Bush praised FEMA Director Michael Brown on September 2, 2005 by using that very phrase. Lindsay Steenberg discusses this phrasing and episode of *America’s Most Wanted* further in her essay for this volume.

<sup>10</sup> “Aesthetics of Catastrophe.”

<sup>11</sup> In exploring *Survivorman* and a rash of other cable programs that come to television in the years after Katrina and are dedicated to depicting men testing their mettle against nature, Goodridge notes that the impulse to stage individualist survivor scenarios exceeds televisual representation alone, as is amply demonstrated in print bestsellers such as Neil Strauss’ *Emergency: This Book Will Save Your Life* (New York: IT Books, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> Jean Burgess & Joshua Green, *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008) p. 77.

<sup>13</sup> Jerry Herron has produced an astute reading of Detroit in similar terms. See “Detroit: Disaster Deferred, Disaster in Progress” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106(4) (Fall, 2007) 663-82.

<sup>14</sup> See “Gentrification Generalized: From Local Anomaly to Urban ‘Regeneration’ as Global Urban Strategy” in *Frontiers of Capital: Ethnographic Reflections on the New Economy*. Eds. Melissa S. Fisher & Greg Downey, Durham: Duke U P, 2006.

<sup>15</sup> *The Rise of the Creative Class: The New Global Competition for Talent*, New York: Harper Business, 2005, p. 248.

<sup>16</sup> A consistent element in public discourse (such as posted Internet responses on national newspaper websites) related to events like the Spring, 2008 floods in the upper Midwest has stressed that victims of such disasters (who were perceived to be universally white) did not whine or ask for government handouts. In the drama of competitive regionalism the Midwest is presented as stoic and abiding in contrast to a “low” black Southernness and New Orleans’ natural state is to be flooded while in the farmland of the Midwest such floods are anomalies that spur narratives of recovery and restoration. The contrastive regionalism in such accounts relies on a virtuous white Midwesternness counterposed with a criminal and calculating Southern blackness.

<sup>17</sup> “Political Culture and Disaster Response: The Great Floods of 1927 and 2005,” *Media, Culture and Society* 31(6) (2009) p. 957.

<sup>18</sup> *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America*, New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009, p. 56.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>20</sup> “What Comes Down Must Go Up: Why Disasters Have Been Good for American Capitalism,” in *American Disasters* ed. Steven Biel, New York & London: NYU P, 2001, p. 74.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>22</sup> See Rick Jervis, “Movie and TV Crews Help Louisiana Recover,” *USA Today* July 16, 2008.

<sup>23</sup> In its adaptation from a well-known series of novels, HBO’s *True Blood* seems both to require a reference to Katrina for purposes of verisimilitude and to want to get that reference out of the way early. The pilot thus opens with an exchange between a convenience store patron and clerk, the latter of whom asks “You didn’t know that New Orleans is a mecca for the vampire?” to which the patron replies “Seriously, I mean New Orleans? Even after Katrina? Didn’t they all drown?” For discussions of the regional and national politics in which *True Blood* is embedded see Lisa Nakamura et al, “Vampire Politics,” *FlowTV* 11(3) 2009, and Stephen Shapiro, “*True Blood* and *Mad Men*’s Passive Revolution: Utopian Reaction in the Age of Obam(a)mnesia,” Paper Presented at Television Cities Conference, University College Dublin, 2009.

<sup>24</sup> *True Blood* relies on tensions between vitality and mortality to perpetuate a well-established pattern of popular representations of the South as subject to what Tara McPherson deems “a cultural schizophrenia.” As she notes “the region remains at once the site of the trauma of slavery and also the mythic location of a vast nostalgia industry.” *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender and Nostalgia in the Imagined South*, Durham: Duke U P, 2003, p. 4.

<sup>25</sup> In a similar vein another post-Katrina film release is *Hurricane Season* (2009) a feel-good success narrative about a state championship-winning basketball team comprised of Katrina evacuees. The film’s cast members include New Orleans native and rap star Lil Wayne. Upcoming is *Mardi Gras*, a sex comedy about a group of male college students that seems to want to re-position New Orleans as the urban destination of choice for spring break exploits.

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<sup>26</sup> In *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America* (New York: Picador, 2008), Susan Faludi reminds us of the traumatic spectacle of rescuer impotence on 9/11 and notes that “the national frenzy to apotheosize these people suggested a deep cultural unease beneath the hero worship.” Pgs. 63-4. In a set of popular films of the immediate post 9/11 period, New York tycoons were frequently morally rehabilitated, demonstrating a renewed commitment to civic concerns and a socially benevolent capitalism. See my essay “Structural Integrity, Historical Reversion and the Post-9/11 Chick Flick,” (*Feminist Media Studies* 8(1) March, 2008) for a fuller discussion.

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