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## Moving testimonies and the geography of suffering: Perils and fantasies of belonging after Katrina

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This essay explores the use of situated testimony in documentary films and videos about belonging, displacement, and return while calling for a ‘spatial turn’ in trauma studies. Through an analysis of selected works about Hurricane Katrina (Spike Lee’s *When the Levees Broke*, Tia Lessin and Carl Deal’s *Trouble the Water*, and the activist video *New Orleans for Sale!* by Brandan Odums, Nik Richard, and the group 2-cent), this paper extrapolates from Cathy Caruth’s insights about psychoanalytic ‘belatedness’ and critical human geography’s anti-essentializing conceptions of place to expose the concomitant materiality and unassimilability of traumatic space. The essay questions assumptions about home and right of return, ultimately advocating what architect Eyal Weizman has called a new mode of ‘practising space’ in the service of social justice.

### Introduction

‘That china closet doesn’t have no business being over here’, exclaims a grief-stricken Wilhelmina Blanchard, inspecting her home for the first time since having evacuated as the hurricane bore down. Picking her way around jagged mounds of overturned furniture amid mouldy walls, she leans for support against the chest of her adult son. This sequence, which appears in Spike Lee’s epic documentary *When the Levees Broke*, is one of the many heart-rending on-site testimonials that comprise, in significant part, the video footage and finished documentaries shot in New Orleans in the months after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and the failure of flood control systems that put 80% of the city under water. Hurricane Katrina had formed over the Bahamas during the third week of August 2005, and went on to make its second landfall as a Category 3 hurricane southeast of New Orleans during the early morning hours of Monday 29 August 2005. US President George W. Bush had declared a state of emergency in selected regions two days prior, and Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco and New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin had ordered mandatory evacuations that were undertaken by more than 1 million people. For those without the ability or means to evacuate, state and local authorities had designated various ‘shelters of last resort’, including the capacious Louisiana Superdome. In the hours following landfall, the storm surge swelled Lake Pontchartrain and the Intercoastal Waterway, overtopping the levees and breaching the floodwalls in various locations in and around the city. In the days that followed, responders in helicopters, boats, and buses finally arrived to rescue and transport out of the area the tens of thousands of people stranded at the Superdome, at the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center, on the Interstate 10 freeway, and elsewhere. At least 1836 people lost their lives in what is generally regarded

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as the greatest natural disaster in US history, although it has been critiqued from a social ecological perspective as eminently ‘unnatural’. Investigations ensued, both of the failure of the flood control system on the Gulf Coast, a system that had been deemed grossly inadequate prior to the storm, and of the federal, state, and local preparation and response. Hurricane Rita, which made landfall on 24 September, necessitated another evacuation and caused further breaches to the compromised levee system and major re-flooding in New Orleans (Amoss 2006; Brinkley 2006; Campanella 2006; Hartman and Squires 2006; Park and Miller 2006; van Heerden and Bryan 2006).<sup>1</sup>

Cameras therefore captured a devastated landscape in which everything had shifted: houses lifted off foundations, or reduced to jutting piles of rubble; cars climbing the walls or weirdly conjoined, chassis to chassis; people wandering displaced, lost in the once-familiar neighbourhoods where they had been born and raised. As Spike Lee comments on the DVD commentary track, ‘The foundation is not there. Your feet are not on solid ground.’ The geography of the terrain – from its furnishings to its urban architecture to its ecology to its economic and racial relations – was massively altered, such that the ways and means of rehabilitation and bioremediation are an open question. And yet the bodily presence of returning residents describes a strong and tangible connection to place, community, neighbourhood, and home; an affective geography that is established and transitory, solid and imaginative.

Looking to trauma theory for insight into this dire situation, we may note the passing importance of violent acts and physical settings in Cathy Caruth’s development of the psychoanalytic concept of ‘belatedness’, through which she theorizes trauma as a psychic structure of experience. ‘The impact of a traumatic event’, she writes, ‘lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time’ and ‘in connection with another place and time’ (1995, 8–9). Indeed, Caruth’s influential work has inspired a rich debate about psychic temporality and the historical truths and enigmas that traumatic experience arguably renders – but significantly less attention has been paid to the spatial aspects, present but little remarked in her writing.

Concentrating as much or more on place as on time – changing the variables to include the *where* alongside the *who*, *what*, and *when* – this essay will engage with the preposition in Mick Broderick and Antonio Traverso’s ‘Interrogating Trauma’ conference call to identify ‘strategies for moving “beyond” ... trauma’. Here I seek to explore the site-specific perorations and perambulations of situated testimony, both as an aspect of a proliferating documentary modality that I call the ‘documentary of return’, and as a manifestation of traumatic, distanced, ultimately unlocatable place within a contemporary geography of suffering.

The situated testimonies this essay seeks to witness are protests delivered mainly after Hurricane Katrina: what people say or do not, or cannot, say from their silted streets and water-ransacked homes; the meanings imported and exported with the cameras and crews who also ‘return’ to the scene. From the vast and growing archive of online and physically distributed testimonial works about suffering and survival after Katrina,<sup>2</sup> I have selected for comparative analysis three documentaries in which return is physically embodied, socially contested, and highly suggestive for critical inquiry: Spike Lee’s Emmy Award winning *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (mini-series, HBO, 2006); Tia Lessin and Carl Deal’s Sundance Film Festival Grand Jury Prize winner *Trouble the Water* (2008); and a brilliant one-and-a-half-minute short, *New Orleans for Sale!* (Brandan Odums, Nik Richard, and other members of the group 2-cent).<sup>3</sup> Each of these texts is a model of its kind—*Levees* an affecting interview-based compilation documentary;

*Trouble* a revealing documentary of ‘shared authority’ (Renov 2004; Ruby 1995; Hagedoorn 2007), part home movie and part *cinema vérité*; and *New Orleans for Sale!*, a creative performance piece. My analysis will depend on these categorical differences. But the broader agenda of this essay is to explore the distinct modes of practising space and return<sup>4</sup> described by each of these films, and, when grouped together, their description of the contours of a new direction in trauma studies.

### Trauma and testimony

As a form of documentary direct address to filmmaker, camera, and spectator from the spot where catastrophic past events occurred, situated testimony realizes the materiality of retrospective witnessing in the power of place. Thousands of people around the world have presented their audiovisual testimonies through the pain of disastrous propinquity, because they have chosen or because they have no choice but to register their presence in a place from which they (temporarily) and loved ones and/or neighbours (permanently) have been wiped out. I am thinking here of the Rwandan digital video artists and archivists with whom Mick Broderick has worked, who speak from the school classroom near to where neighbours set against neighbours and from the grounds of the Kigali Genocide Centre, built over the mass grave of 300,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutu massacred during a one-hundred-day period (Broderick 2009). I am thinking of the *adivasi* or indigenous activists in South Asia who speak from the banks of waterways that have inundated the land that their families farmed for generations prior to the construction of massive dams for hydroelectric power (Ghosh 2009). Within the sizeable literature of testimony studies (Felman and Laub 1992; Douglass and Vogler 2003; Guerin and Hallas 2007; Langer 1991; Sarkar and Walker 2009<sup>5</sup>), Holocaust subject matter has held prominence. In this major diasporic testimonial paradigm, the overwhelming majority of testimonies have been delivered at a temporal and physical distance from the events they invoke. It may be that this perspective has obscured our view of situated testimony as a distinctive, affecting, performative – and extremely common – testimonial paradigm.

Situated testimonies in *When the Levees Broke* are increasingly prominent as the compilation documentary advances in broadly chronological order – and as people *can* get back to their neighbourhoods to be interviewed there.<sup>6</sup> On site, these interlocutors do not just verbalize but also *incarnate* the film’s core problems and critique: that folks were stranded, evacuation impaired, help and rescue grievously delayed; that the government was and is at fault; that racial and economic discrimination is a factor; insurance companies are corrupt and developers are poised to profit from desperate homeowners forced to sell out cheaply; that the act of return is immeasurably difficult or impossible for the poor of whom most, in New Orleans, are black; that white gentrification is occurring; that many subsequent deaths should rightly be ascribed to the trauma of Katrina; that suffering is extending, hyperbolically into the post-evacuation phase (as one protest sign puts it, ‘Katrina Survivor, FEMA victim’;<sup>7</sup> and that the re-engineering of the levees was not achieved in the nearly 40 years after Hurricane Betsy and was by no means achieved by the date of filming (nor today).

One of the most affecting of these interviews is with Joycelynn Moses who relates her survival narrative from her ruined neighbourhood. At one point (following news footage of men wading chest deep in water to the soundtrack’s solo trumpet rendition of the ‘St. James Infirmary’ blues), the camera travels to find her, over a red ‘Danger’ sign and panning right, across where the floodwaters invaded, to the landlocked barge. ‘This is the barge, and when it came . . . we thought we were going to die’, we hear Moses recall in

anguished voiceover. We see a close-up of the barge's alphanumeric markings accompanied by Moses' voiceover testimony: 'and I remember the number ING 4727'. The camera cuts to her: a slender African American woman, perhaps in late middle age, yellow hair, and bracelets on her wrists, and we are on the ground in proximity to this iconic image of upheaval. 'If they would've took this away I would've remembered the number, 'cause I wrote it down and put it in my pocketbook.' The camera follows Moses' gesturing arm and pointing finger to the settled barge, and the houses crushed beneath and in front of it. 'And the couple that live there, they couldn't get, afford to get out either.<sup>8</sup> They're still in there if they're still there.' The camera continues right to reveal a house that withstood the inundation, its spray-painted marking including a '0' to denote no dead bodies found within. But we know from media reports that two children and a man were sucked off a rooftop and drowned as the floodwaters in this vicinity rose and surged through the breach, arguably created by the barge's battering action (Evans 2008). Ringed by the shingles of downed roofs, Moses turns around nearly 180 degrees and stretches out her other arm. Again the camera follows. Houses and their contents smashed to smithereens. A white appliance and something yellow – perhaps a child's ride-along-toy – pop against the grey driftwood of people's former lives.<sup>9</sup>

They have a man that liv[e] here. He tied hisself to beer kegs. They may still be in the yard. And he floated in the water just for three days and I just kept talking to him, telling him God gonna make a way, God gonna make a way. You goin' a make it. And he was saying, I'm so tired. I know you're tired.

Now Moses looks straight into the lens as the sequence ends with her remembered helplessness. All she could do was observe, record what she could, and, later, tell what she witnessed and felt: 'And I wanted to feed him what I had, but I couldn't get to him 'cause I didn't know how to swim.'

'Object survivors'<sup>10</sup> – physical reminders of what was – stop and start Moses' memories of prior habitation as they unfold vacantly in the crook of her extended arm. Riffing on the connotations of the camera 'viewfinder', Martin Lefebvre points out that views are as much framed as they are found, and, concomitantly, that 'the view itself cannot be divorced from the other experiential aspects that accompany it' (2006, xv). Turning as the camera pans, Moses delivers a kinaesthetic testimony that is a matter of sensory and cinematic movement both.

## **Belonging**

It is against this painful and paradoxical reality of displacement-in-place that the film makes its case for return. 'New Orleanians and Louisianians are a resilient people', states a New Orleans City Council Member: 'they will rebuild their lives'. But weak and demographically uneven as it is today, recovery in New Orleans was still weaker – and certainly a struggle – during the film's shooting and post-production phases and at the time of the film's release one year after Katrina.<sup>11</sup> Civic groups such as ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) were fighting for the resources and the right to rebuild African American neighbourhoods against pressure from certain quarters, including the Urban Land Institute, to rebuild only on high ground: i.e. in the wealthier, whiter areas of the city (Crowley 2006; Carr 2005). Basic public services and infrastructure including public schools, child care, mail delivery, garbage pick-up, bus and streetcar routes took months or even years to resume in various parts of the city (Liu, Fellowes, and Mabanta 2006; Jervis 2007). There is no definitive 'after' to the brief before and extended during that are the timeframes of this film and catastrophe.

The film has adopted a number of strategies to do its part to secure the staked claim of New Orleanians, and especially African American New Orleanians, to the territory and right of return, with situated testimony both encountered (as when the crew comes upon a person who consents to be interviewed) and enacted (as with Wilhelmina Blanchard) prominent among them. Blanchard presumably would have inspected her home around that same time in any event, but this particular visit, in the company of her son, musician Terence Blanchard (who has scored several of Lee's films), his aunt, and also, off-camera, cinematographer Cliff Charles and Spike Lee (who had asked to be present for this occasion), was made in partnership with the film project. The light illuminating the interior space of the home was likely shone from a portable spotlight provided by Charles.

The flipside of the coin of situated testimony is the unsituated interview conducted against a locationally neutral backdrop: set, that is, in no place at all rather than either New Orleans or someplace else in particular. In fact this latter type is actually the film's most common type of interview, with the luminous blues and brick reds of the lit and textured backgrounds contributing its signature look. When Phyllis Montana LeBlanc explains from the steps of her FEMA trailer (finally delivered eight months after landfall) that although she and her husband are in the city they love, her mother, sisters, niece, and nephew are dispersed and unable to return because, for one thing, appropriate support services for Phyllis' nephew with autism no longer exist in the city, her words are affirmed by her sister Gina Montana's interview, out of place against its neutral background. 'With the evacuation scattering my family all over the United States, I felt like it was an ancient memory; as if we had been up on the auction block.'<sup>12</sup>

Oscillating, as it does, therefore, between situated testimony as an expression of territorial belonging and geographically neutral testimony as a controlled expression of outrageous dispossession, the film pauses pregnantly at the words of FEMA chief Michael Brown. Caught in news footage from the time, struggling to explain his lack of response to the tens of thousands of stranded New Orleanians, Brown stated: 'There are people that are beginning to manifest themselves out in the community that *we didn't know were there*'. Just so.

The film directs the attention of viewers – returns it in a way – not only to physical presence in this city but also to the neglect of people's needs, when public transportation out of the city was not arranged, when they were confined (as when some were turned back by armed police as they tried to self-evacuate by walking across the Crescent City connection into the demographically white city on the other side<sup>13</sup>), and, most of all, it returns the viewers to the apparently *alienable* belonging of the people to the place, that the film itself undertakes to rectify through enacted return, cinematographic return, and the exposure of impossible return.

### Evacuating agency

Strongly as I believe in the mission and value of the uses, in *Levees*, of situated and unsituated testimony simultaneously to claim and to (dis)locate people and city through a traumatic *mise-en-scène*, I sense as well a nostalgic quality in the film's articulation of a 'longing for a home that no longer exists or [as I'll discuss] has never existed' (Boym 2001, xiii). When it comes to the would-be 'solution of return', the film's policy position that people should be allowed – and helped – to return *to the status quo* overlooks many of the social and spatial mediations of person, place, restitution, and return.

Whether trauma studies can comprehend this quandary depends on how we read the field. Here I want to acknowledge some of the limitations of existing trauma theories, a

number of which have been elucidated by Susannah Radstone in her brilliant trauma scholarship over the last decade and more. One of the main criticisms levelled at trauma theory is that while the Caruthian formulation *seemingly* emphasizes the ‘belatedness’ or the continuously ‘unexperienced nature of trauma’ (Radstone 2007, 15) in fact we may discern in Caruth’s work what Radstone and Ruth Leys identify, in their close readings, as an anti-mimetic tendency that conceives of trauma ‘as if it were a purely external event that befalls a fully constituted subject’ (Radstone 2007, 14 quoting Leys 2000, 10).

Having begun this essay teasing out of Caruth’s work a suggestive, if ghostly, appearance of unassimilable space, I concur with Radstone that we stand to benefit from further analysis of Caruth’s and other theories of trauma and applied trauma screen studies. With regard to this key question of the location of trauma as related to the brain function of the person and/or the field around her or him, I subscribe to a *critical* trauma studies, with the potential to recast not only the isolating framework that comprehends event and psyche as separate sovereign entities and the social science model that vacates psychic process but also any psycho-medico model of psychic process that ignores the socio-cultural aetiology of trauma.

‘Events are not inherently traumatic’, writes cultural trauma scholar Jeffrey Alexander, rejecting ‘lay’ trauma theory’s ‘naturalistic fallacy’ in favour of a constructivist model. Rather, ‘trauma is a socially mediated attribution’ (Alexander 2004, 2, 8). But one might question whether Alexander’s notion of social subjectivity takes sufficient account of unconscious processes. Maurice Stevens’ ethnocultural perspective that ‘who “can be traumatized” [who has the cultural collateral, that is, to claim injury and the right to recompense] is shaped by ideas of race, class, gender and sexuality’ is absolutely crucial, especially if one operates from the assumption that the ‘traumatized who’ her/himself is constituted within existing formations of race, class, gender and sexuality (Stevens 2005, 2006).

Surveying the field of trauma studies, I particularly appreciate Arthur Kleinman’s and Veena Das’s extension in their trilogy with various co-editors (Kleinman, Das, and Lock 1997; Das et al. 2000, 2001) of ‘trauma’ to ‘social suffering’, where social suffering is ‘an assemblage of human problems that have their origins and consequences in the devastating injuries that social force can inflict on human experience’ (Kleinman, Das, and Lock 1997, ix). Kleinman, Das, and Lock break down disciplinary boundaries around the fields of health, welfare, law, morality, and religion (ix) in order to re-establish ‘the *collective and intersubjective* connections of experience’ [my emphasis] and the salubrious subjectivity that social suffering damages (x).

This thoughtful, important work in critical trauma studies is, I believe, in our collective interest to sustain. But I hope this Katrina reading exemplifies the claim I offer here that trauma studies still has neglected the generative possibilities of place. What I would propose, therefore, is perhaps not so much a ‘beyond’ of trauma studies but a kind of spin around the cloverleaf: that is, a ‘spatial turn’ in trauma studies effected through the incorporation of enormously promising insights from critical human geography. It is there, in that post-positivist sub-discipline, that a materialist spatial perspective is reasserted, such that location matters, but place is not essentialized or reified as a truth-telling topography. The stones don’t speak except through a kind of critical ventriloquism, yet they are more than mere inert features of a fixed terrain. In his seminal work *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre delineates a particular ‘*object* of knowledge’ that is ‘the fragmented and uncertain connection’ between these ‘representations of space’ (be they found, constructed, or both) and ‘representational spaces’ (including media aesthetics, institutions, and practices). He writes that this particular object of knowledge

'implies (and explains) a *subject*', notably, 'that subject in whom lived, perceived and conceived ... come together within spatial practice' (Lefebvre [1974] 1991, 230). In Edward S. Casey's terms, '[T]he lived body is coterminous with place because it is by bodily movement that I find my way in place and take up habitation there' (Casey 1987, 180).

This move and these concepts seem to me absolutely crucial both for trauma studies as an interdiscipline and for the application of trauma studies to film and media, a field that studies nothing if not the mutually formative relationship of spatial topography and being-in-the-world, or the constitution of subjectivity within and through Lefebvre's 'representation[s] of space' and 'representational spaces'.<sup>14</sup>

Also inspired by Lefebvre, art historian Irit Rogoff explains in *Terra Infirmis* that critical human geography's 'situated knowledge' (2000, 22) enables

a shift from a moralizing discourse of geography and location, in which we are told what ought to be, who has the right to be where and how it ought to be so, to a contingent ethics of geographical emplacement in which we might jointly puzzle out the perils of the fantasms of belonging as well as of the tragedies of not belonging. (3)

A spatial turn in trauma studies of art, film, and media would seem extremely useful for understanding trauma as the experiential displacement of place, protagonist, and, as will be discussed below, of spectator.

Returning, therefore, to the problematic of situated testimony in documentary film, and *When the Levees Broke* in particular, I would argue that, concerned as it is with the 'tragedies of not belonging', the film ignores the chance to 'puzzle out' Rogoff's 'perils of the fantasms of belonging'. While *Levees* includes frequent references to (lost) home ownership by African Americans in New Orleans, it contains few references to the long-term, intransigent problems of poverty<sup>15</sup> even though – as outside statistics reveal – prior to Katrina, 91.2% of the city's poor families of all races were African American and 35% of African Americans (compared with 11% of whites) were living below the poverty line (Park and Miller 2006, 13). By concentrating on immediate contingency, idealizing home and community, and embracing identity politics, *Levees* may actually inhibit the 'working through' of long-standing social malaise at the very moment when exposed racism demands a new order.

Certainly we have an ethical obligation to recognize and honour the claims of returnees to this 'fatal environment'.<sup>16</sup> Rooted testimonies matter. But still it behoves us to take seriously Caruth's hints about trauma's distanced 'other place', about the psychic dimensions and 'belatedness' – or profound *unassimilability* – of place and occurrence that make up the traumatic experience of which these interviewees speak. The ground of testimony-*sur-place* – like exilic space – is always, already 'other'.

### **Social ecology of suffering**

Disenfranchisement as a kind of distancing of African Americans from their home city was already a problem of enormous historical, economic, social, and environmental consequence *before* Katrina struck. The moniker 'Katrina' alludes not only to the meteorological events of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita (including the breaches of the I-walls and canals and the overtopping of the levees) – not only to this so-called 'natural disaster'. Rather, in social ecological terms, it invokes the 'malign intersection of weather and water with a man-made social and racial topography' that we describe, all-in, as Katrina (Park and Miller 2006, 15 quoting The Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program). As Yoosun Park and Joshua Miller explain, there is an unevenness of risk



factors in the face of calamity such that '[t]he most disadvantaged members of the most disadvantaged communities suffer the greatest losses when disaster strikes' (10). In New Orleans specifically, '[s]ome of the most historic Black neighborhoods . . . were on the lowest ground and sustained some of the most severe damage' (Crowley 2006, 141).

Park and Miller's social ecological analysis of urban landscapes reads like a location breakdown of this documentary project:

The socially disadvantaged are more likely to live near chemical plants, landfills, and other contaminated lands. There is a greater likelihood that they will be living in more vulnerable, substandard dwellings served by older, less well-maintained infrastructures, for example, roads, sewers. They are more likely to be living in overcrowded, environmentally risky areas. Much of public housing, built during the 1950s and 1960s, tend [*sic*] to cluster in areas that are along major transportation routes, reclaimed land, or adjacent to industrial facilities. (2006, 10, citing Cutter 2005)

The location shooting of *Levees* in the devastated Ninth Ward, combined with archival footage of the stranded inhabitants, reveals a city noticeably segregated by race and income, where middle- and upper-middle-class white residents of New Orleans' 'outlying (and . . . literally higher) suburban communities' are nowhere to be seen, while poor blacks wade through the toxic ooze in 'low-lying flood-prone areas' (Hartman and Squires 2006, 5).

The film's traumatic landscape was in my eye and ear when I undertook my own small trip to this environment out of which people were blown, flown, bussed, flooded, rescued, evacuated, and disappeared, about which they speak with such dignity, and to which they struggle to return, both literally and in terms of a return to structural integrity.<sup>17</sup> The disposition of areas of the city in April of 2008 was very much in line with what Spike Lee and those who appeared before his cameras had analysed historically and predicted two years prior: the Lafitte Avenue public housing complex, the last of the ambitious projects built in post-Second World War New Orleans by Franklin Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration, was on the verge of demolition, against public protest. The Lafitte had become notorious for criminal, especially drug-related, activity. But, 'scaled to fit within the surrounding neighborhood' and designed with wrought-iron balustrades and communal courtyards (Ourossoff 2006), the red brick housing blocks were also home to working poor – the maids and other service workers of the city's tourism industry. The buildings had not flooded inside. Tenants were given a window of opportunity to return to New Orleans from Houston or Memphis or Atlanta or Chicago to collect their belongings. But when that metaphorical window closed so did the *actual* doors and windows of their homes, sealed up at considerable expense by the Housing Authority of New Orleans' installation of metal plates. Once opened for clearing, workers, including many Latinos new to the city, bagged up and threw away the worldly possessions of displaced African American families, in preparation for demolition.<sup>18</sup> This is clearly policy, not 'nature'. What with the destruction of public housing, the end of federal rental subsidies, and the recall of temporary trailers, some of New Orleans' working poor had taken up residence in tents under the I-10 freeway.<sup>19</sup>

Naomi Klein specifically discusses the condemning and razing of the houses of the poor in the aftermath of Katrina as an effect of the phenomenon she describes as 'disaster capitalism': a form of opportunistic corporatism that capitalizes on sudden catastrophic events to 'rai[d] the public sphere' by suspending governmental checks and balances in favour of high-stakes insider business dealings, privatization, deregulation, and drastic reduction of social spending, all of which adversely affect poor and middle-class people and any others who dissent (2007, 6). Disaster capitalism is 'fundamentalist',

Klein explains, invoking the supremacist ideology of its advocates as well as its historical and philosophical affinities with religious extremism. Within the first three paragraphs of her book *Shock Doctrine*, Klein quotes Congressman Richard Baker's chilling post-Katrina statement (also included in *Levees*): 'We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn't do it, but God did.' As of March 2008, two and a half years after Katrina, New Orleans had reached only 71.8% of its pre-Katrina population of about half a million people (Russell 2006; Falk, Hunt, and Hunt 2006) with African Americans, those living in poverty, and registered Democrats as significantly overlapping demographic categories in which the rate of return is dramatically lower (Frey 2007; Powell et al. 2006; Crowley 2006; Zdenek et al. 2006).<sup>20</sup> The city of New Orleans, Louisiana (NOLA), it could be said, is under occupation by gentrification.

And yet the film's investment in the human rights discourse of 'right of return' may be a political, interpersonal, and geographic dead end. I hazard this statement while acknowledging: monumental negligence by the federal government and private insurance companies; disproportional capital in the hands of residential, commercial, and industrial developers; and the fact that rational people may find quite a bit of traction invoking the right of return from the standpoint of ethical commitment. But the deepest problem of 'right of return', I would argue, is not that people aren't back, but rather that the geography this discourse maps lacks potential. In a petrified topography, return may serve no purpose more fully, as Wendy Brown as argued, than to further 'reif[y] and regulat[e] the subject produced by social powers' (Brown 2000, 471).<sup>21</sup> It isn't safe to return to former conditions in which subjects were constrained by the economies of structural engineering and engineered race- and class-based segregation.

### *Trouble the Water*

Kimberly and Scott Roberts, protagonists of *Trouble the Water* (2008), do return to New Orleans (like Wilhelmina Blanchard, Joycelynn Moses, and others in *Levees*), initially to survey the destruction of their neighbourhood and eventually to take up residence once again. But this film, compared with *Levees*, is less idealizing with regard to return, more open to airing the dirty laundry of mono-economic and monoracial community, and therefore more resistant to a separatist geography that in Rogoff's terms 'bind[s] us all together under the aegis of the dominant' (2000, 110–11).

With its complicated temporal structure that begins in the middle and flashes back and forward, *Trouble*, unlike *Levees*, encompasses distinct 'before' and 'after' Katrina timeframes in which the Lower Ninth Ward neighbourhood is depicted warts and all. Here there is an active agent in the person of Kimberly Rivers Roberts who not only self-evacuates with her husband, taking along children and others who cannot help themselves, but also plans and shoots the *cinéma vérité*-style home movie footage that anchors this vibrant semi-autobiographical documentary. As we hear her say to neighbours from behind the video camera she purchased just prior to the storm (Willis 2008): 'If I get some exciting shit, maybe I can sell it to the white folks.' Moreover, instead of a situated testimony here and there, this film includes an extended return trajectory in which the Robertses retrace their evacuation route, re-encountering along the way objects, obstacles, and those who would also testify.

'I'm on my way to New Orleans', we hear Kimberly Roberts say into her cell phone as she and her husband return with a friend two weeks after the storm (although released after *Levees*, *Trouble* began its post-Katrina location shooting earlier). 'Some people I met are doing a documentary; a real documentary'. And through the windows of the car, the lens of

the protagonists' camera, and the lens of this 'real documentary', we see the muddied streets and downed buildings; the shocking iconography of the Katrina cycle: once she arrives, we see Kimberly and company walking and gesturing and speaking of what was: 'Everybody! This is my neighborhood . . . I miss those days and it's hurt me to know that it's not going to be the same no more.'

Roberts is not only viewing the devastation but actually reconnoitering, performing inspections that had not yet been carried out by officials (even though the spray-painted markings showed they had).<sup>22</sup> We are with Roberts on the street when the group discovers her uncle, dead in the front room of a house where he had sought shelter, and pulls in National Guardsmen to handle the body; the odour of death suffuses the scene throughout their efforts to show respect while bearing the stench.

Kimberly and Scott Roberts and company also proactively retrace the path they had followed during their self-evacuation, returning to the stations of their self-help in the face of abandonment by the government. Unlike in *Levees*, here the territory is not deserted but rather occupied by people in authority whom they re-encounter. To take just one example, while evacuating they had been denied entrance to an abandoned naval barracks by troops with M-16s cocked and aimed. But now, upon their return, a military commander at the gate denies Scott's claim, asserting: there was 'never any hint of us using any type of force', and also, self-contradictorily, 'we had to do our job and protect the interest of the government'. Thus, although *Trouble* shares the Roberts's perspective by presenting a pathway strewn with landmarks of the group's resourcefulness and generosity (they got hold of a truck and evacuated 30 people to Alexandria, Louisiana), it also exposes the performativity of testimony and its inevitable complications as a truth-seeking mode.

Through the Roberts's down-to-earth footage of 'the before' and our own saccadic vision<sup>23</sup> – and in contradistinction to *Levees*' dignified narration of pre-Katrina community – we observe alcoholism, drug dealing, and combative behaviour, as when the men at a corner store challenge Roberts filming them and she snaps back, presumably alluding to the surveillance camera, 'What you looking at? You got *me* on camera.' We see snippets of a car interior while on the soundtrack Roberts' voice is heard talking with the car's occupant who is looking to buy some weed (another type of 'shit' for her to sell?); we see her uncle passed out on a well-trodden stoop in a drunken haze, prior to his death in the storm. 'Don't do that when ya'll get big', Roberts warns the children playing nearby.

In *Trouble the Water*'s orchestration of situated testimony and *cinema vérité* sequences, we hear the accusation of bias so loudly played in *Levees*, and the tones of self-induced damage. Scott Roberts explains that he had previously turned to drug dealing because there were no good employment options for a person with limited education. And yet, by the end of the film (perhaps 18 months later), we see the positive results of his choice to take a carpenter job. 'Now I get to rebuild my city', he exults. 'I love the smell of that sawdust.'

Near the end of the film Roberts is back in her neighbourhood, speaking warmly of the benefits of community:

Three cars of people pass and they all know us . . . If something happened to me right around here, right now, somebody's gonna do something for me 'cause they know me . . . If I ain't got a ride, somebody's gonna give me a ride. And if I need some money . . . they might not loan me no money, but they'll give me some conversation. So, you know, it feels good to be back home.

Yes, but. In her own footage at the beginning of the film, we had heard Roberts state that she had tried to rent a car but just 'couldn't afford the luxury' of leaving. And as the film informs us with a line of text subtitled the image of the bumper-to-bumper exodus, there

was no public transportation provided for pre-storm evacuation, although Mayor Nagin did order traffic contraflow for those with wheels. Perhaps Uncle Ned too lacked a neighbourly ride out of town.

More than simply sharing *Levees'* longing for black community, *Trouble* does also suggest 'the perils of the fantasms of belonging' to a racially and economically segregated geography where neighbours lack the resources to help neighbours, and interracial strife makes hotspots of the islands and perimeters that mark out difference. And yet, where *Levees'* discourse is frustrated eloquence against injustice,<sup>24</sup> *Trouble* ends with an impression, however utopian, of integrated community. The 'white folks' to whom Kimberly did sell her footage (or, presumably, reach some sort of positive financial arrangement) incorporated her music as professional singer/songwriter Kold Medina amply into the film. Roberts's displacement by the storm and flood and, significantly, her co-authorship of a return narrative (living history that could be filmed and filming history that demanded to be lived) expanded Roberts's orbit beyond New Orleans: 'I'm trying to do something different. I see it now. I couldn't see it before when I was inside.'

### Where is trauma?

Katrina's territory – this same and 'other' spot – is multiply inhabited with an effect of strife or benefit, as the case may be.

In the context of Israel–Palestine, Eyal Weizman has suggested that how we 'practice space' is important, especially when historical moments of evacuation offer new and humanizing possibilities for the reallocation of resources (that we would implement thoughtfully and in opposition to the 'clean slate' fundamentalism of a Richard Baker). Importing Weizman's terms, the flooded city of New Orleans could be seen to represent a moment of 'ungrounding'; undeniable disaster, yes, but still an opportunity to 'disactivate' the ills of economic and racial segregation characteristic of the pre-Katrina environment (Weizman 2008). Buildings can be repurposed, surface structures such as roadways and green spaces reorganized to connect formerly divided habitations, and the US infrastructure – as well as the levees – re-engineered in the interest of human rights. I can't but feel that such a *transformative* view of race and place – which, arguably, could include an economically, architecturally, and even racially mixed<sup>25</sup> housing plan along with a complete reworking of the system of resources distribution – would constitute an ethical foundation for a rebuilt New Orleans.

*Levees* and *Trouble* are at their most compelling when they offer a critical sense of space, as they do when their situated testimonies expose the politicized granularity of the ground below our feet and the possibilities for spatial transformation. A more explicitly activist video piece goes even further to array the complexities of shared space.

*New Orleans for Sale!* screened at the 2008 New Orleans International Human Rights Festival and is currently available for viewing on YouTube. I saw it on my visit to the city several days after the desire to conduct ethnographic research on 'disaster tourism' led me to take an official 'Hurricane Katrina Tour' with the Gray Line bus company. In the video, the group '2-cent' have performed a special kind of 'return' to the Ninth Ward, reoccupying the space from which many families have been expunged and registering (to disaster tourists such as me and others) the gains of carpet-bagging entrepreneurs and outsiders. Standing on roofs and sidewalks in front of damaged, vacant homes, the group members hold up hand-lettered signs that read 'America Did This' and 'This Is What You Paid To See Right' while Nik Richard asks pointedly 'It looks like there's more money to

be paid in devastation than regeneration. If ya'll keep paying your money to see it, should we rebuild it?'

The video succeeds not only by virtue of the sheer power of performance but also, I contend (hoping this is considered opinion and not mere self-justification), because the tourists and 2-cent meet on common ground,<sup>26</sup> or, one could say, on a mobilized terrain. Shots are taken from inside as well as from the outside of passing vehicles. In identifying the boundaries of the neighbourhood while also allowing them to be breached, the video enacts an energetic encounter between those who have returned home, those who cannot return for real, and those who tour. In the spirit of engagement, I suggest the value of going and seeing and acting together; spending our money not only to visit but also to remake space as multiply inhabited community. In the Ninth Ward a number of homes designated as a Musicians' Village have been rebuilt and colourfully painted in a collaborative effort by Habitat for Humanity and local homeowners. Moreover, although the Lafitte Avenue and other housing projects were torn down rather than remodelled, the non-profit developer has made a commitment to "one-to-one" replacement of public housing units' with a promising mix of new on-site housing and "in-fill" development' in the surrounding neighbourhood. Existing but dilapidated homes are now being stripped back to their cypress studs, remodelled, and prepared for subsidized ownership by low-income residents (Rechdahl and Williams 2008; Sinha 2009).<sup>27</sup>

Where is trauma? As indicated, I support the elasticization of psycho-medico trauma models that otherwise bind up trauma as an internally psychic process. Of course, many of the survivors of Katrina were psychologically traumatized by their experiences. I was able to speak with a licensed psychologist whom the Red Cross had placed, as a volunteer, in a Dallas shelter in the weeks following the storm and flood.<sup>28</sup> She confirmed incredible suffering and traumatization and also the practical limits of psychological intervention when people are still missing family members and in need of medical triage. (And she blanched when I told her of our aim to 'interrogate trauma', a phrase that for her invoked an association between trauma and torture.) Matters of individual psychology notwithstanding, what I have tried to argue here is the importance, even as we empathize with or work on behalf of Katrina survivors, of theorizing the mutuality of psychosocial processes, the social ecology of disaster, and the role of situated media. Observing psychic disturbance at the medial interface, I advocate the importation of trauma models of arts and media studies we may identify as relevant, and, yes, that we interrogate trauma with all the critical acuity we can muster as a mobilized, spatialized site.

Documentary films of situated testimony and return – those I've discussed and others in the mode – comprise a limit case of the cinematic 'site-seeing' that Giuliana Bruno attributes to cinema spectating in general (2002, 15–53). However physically grounded or engaged with the affective lure of home, they still describe an 'unhomed geography' (in Rogoff's idiom) transformative with regard to rites/rights of return and porous in its ethnic, racial, generational, and economic contours. Each of the films discussed in its own way renders NOLA's 'other' space as an experientially unreachable traumatic terrain, but one for which the fullest range of reconstructive possibilities must nevertheless be imagined and explored.

Spatial trauma studies and especially, but not exclusively, these films of situated testimony have a great deal to contribute, I believe, to pressing conversations and policy work on the geopolitics of our multiply inhabited planet at a time of increasing, often forced, mobility and intense struggle for places to call home.

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## Notes

1. The literature on Hurricane Katrina is voluminous and I will be citing further articles, books, and reports throughout this paper.
2. In addition to the films discussed here, see *Right to Return: Home Movies from the Lower 9th Ward* (dir. Jonathan Demme, 2008), segments of which were aired on PBS’s *Tavis Smiley* in the spring of 2007; *Still Waiting: Life after Katrina* (dir. Ginny Martin and Kate Browne, 2007); *The Drive: A Documentary Tour of Post-Katrina New Orleans*, Segment one: The Lower 9th Ward (dir. Tim Ryan and Matt Wisdom, 2006); *Kamp Katrina* (dir. David Redmon and Ashley Sabin, 2007); *The Axe in the Attic* (dir. Ed Pincus and Lucia Small, 2007); *God Provides* (dir. Brian M. Cassidy and Melanie Shatzky, 2007, short); *Faubourg Tremé: The Untold Story of Black New Orleans* (dir. Dawn Logsdon, 2008); and the hybrid fictionalized feature *Low and Behold* (dir. Zachary Godshall, 2007). See also online archives including: The Hurricane Digital Memory Bank, a project of George Mason University’s Center for History and New Media and the University of New Orleans, in partnership with the Smithsonian Institutions, [www.hurricanearchive.org](http://www.hurricanearchive.org) (accessed 15 August 2008); the New Orleans Video Access Center, which organized local film and videomakers to create works about Katrina that were posted online and screened throughout the country, [www.novacvideo.org](http://www.novacvideo.org) (accessed 15 August 2008); Alive in Truth: The New Orleans Disaster Oral History and Memory Project which collects and makes available transcripts of oral interviews, [www.aliveintruth.org](http://www.aliveintruth.org) (accessed 15 August 2008). For a discussion of some of these and other Katrina archives, see Stein and Preuss (2006).
3. Available on 2-cent.com (accessed 4 October 2008) and YouTube.
4. Eyal Weizman used the term ‘practising space’ in ‘Conversations’, a talk presented at the REDCAT, Walt Disney Concert Hall, Los Angeles, 6 May 2008. See also Weizman (2007).
5. Bhaskar Sarkar and I discuss the extensive scholarly literature on testimony as well as the recent proliferation of audiovisual archives in our introduction (‘Introduction: Moving testimonies’) to *Documentary Testimonies: Global Archives of Suffering*.
6. The film’s four acts (five on DVD) carry us through from immediately before to after the hurricanes (Katrina and Rita) and flood. But a finer vernier reveals a ‘sort of overture’, in Ernest Callenbach’s phrase (2006, 6), to each act comprised in most cases of an a-chronological, associational montage set to music that includes at least one, usually more than one, aerial shot of New Orleans amongst images on the ground including a signature shot along a road narrowed by the heaped timbers and shingles of ruined homes. Each act or ‘movement’ (to invoke the film’s rich soundtrack as well as its own titular musical reference) ends with a departure of sorts: Act II’s montage of dead and bloated bodies, left floating or beached by the receding waters, is followed by a low-angle long take of poet Shelton Shakespear Alexander delivering his piercing recitation against the high arched gate of a cemetery with the sky behind. Then comes a repetition of the roadway tracking shot, and finally, over the destroyed rooftops, an indelible image of the giant barge that broke through the Industrial Canal into a residential neighbourhood in the Lower Ninth Ward. Exemplary for its epic complexity as well as sweep, the film spirals down into the maelstrom of the flooded city and yet resuscitates the bodies, voices, and ideas of people on the ground.
7. Federal Emergency Management Agency; the entity that became famous around the world for its negligence during Katrina.
8. Having listened repeatedly to this passage, I think Moses’ phrase is properly transcribed. But she may have stated that the couple ‘couldn’t get aboard [a boat perhaps?] to get out either’ rather

- than 'couldn't get, afford to get out either'. Suffice it to say that financial wherewithal was an enormous factor in people's ability to evacuate safely.
9. Such objects are generative of narrative rather than mere vessels for symbolic meaning. See Jameson (1992, esp. 19).
  10. This term is borrowed from its use in Holocaust museology. See Shenker (2009).
  11. Less than 50% of New Orleanians had returned by the one-year anniversary, including substantially fewer African American than white former residents. See Nossiter (2006); US Census Bureau, State & County QuickFacts, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/22/22071.htm> (accessed 15 August 2008); and Wikipedia entry for New Orleans, Louisiana, sub-category 'demographics'. Other major reports on post-Katrina recovery include Liu, Fellowes, and Mabanta (2006) and Liu and Plyer (2008a).
  12. An interview with public intellectual Michael Dyson is edited in here to take up Montana's reference to the history of slavery: he mocks those who would disclaim the validity of the reference: 'Oh, no, you're being hyperbolic. You're just engaging in all forms of racially inflammatory rhetoric ...' And then concludes: 'Well, the fact is they were treating them like slaves in the ship. Families were being separated. Children were being taken from their mothers and fathers. Those more weary and those who were more likely to be vulnerable were separated from those who were stronger ... The separation of the evacuation where people lost sight and lost sound and lost sense of their loved ones ...'
  13. While widely known and decried, this event *as an example of racial bias* has been denied by Gretna Mayor Ronnie Harris. A lawsuit was filed by state Senator Cleo Fields (D-Baton Rouge) and state Representative Cedric Richmond (D-New Orleans) against the city of Gretna and the Gretna Police Department. See Webster (2006).
  14. For several superb film and media studies works that incorporate spatial studies see Krause and Petro (2003); Dimendberg (2004); and Lefebvre (2006).
  15. There are some such references as when Calvin Mackie refers to pre-Katrina social problems including New Orleans' high murder rate, high dropout rate, and low wages.
  16. I adapt the term 'fatal environment' from Slotkin (1985).
  17. My friend Dave Cash in the Fair Grounds Race Course area still does not have heat upstairs because water remains in his heating ducts and neither his homeowner's insurance nor the city will take responsibility.
  18. See del Barco (2005) for a report on the controversy over the arrival of Latino workers from Texas, Florida, and Mexico to undertake the strenuous cleanup work in post-Katrina New Orleans, in some cases over the protests of local residents concerned that they had been 'replaced by lower-wage Spanish-speaking workers'. See also Bearden (2007).
  19. '150 people are living in tents under the I-10 overpass, 31 percent of whom are recently homeless because of the loss of federal rental assistance or their removal from temporary trailers', according to Liu and Plyer (2008b). The residents of the tent city were relocated in the summer of 2008 through the efforts of various homeless and charitable service organizations.
  20. Frey indicates that 'while 64 percent of the city's pre-Katrina white population returned by July 2006, only 43 percent of black residents – and just 22 percent of black residents age 25–34 – did so'.
  21. See also Brown (1995). Although space constraints preclude the development of this thought in the body of the essay, I would like to mention here that reification of black subjectivity in the case of Katrina also consists in the tendency to attribute discriminatory actions, inactions, and practices on the part of public officials to the 'fact' of blackness instead of to the failings of said officials. This point occurred to me while listening to Nessian McMillan's superb presentation, 'Bearing witness: The Rwandan genocide on the global stage', at the 'Interrogating Trauma: Arts & Media Responses to Collective Suffering' international conference.
  22. 'Keeping it real', as Hot 8 Brass Band member Dinerral Shavers put it in *Levees*, gesturing toward homes bearing spray-painted marks of inspection but also barred windows and locked doors belying the graphic claim that anyone had entered ('They didn't go into none of these houses'). A prominent New Orleans musician, Shavers was shot to death while driving in a car with his wife and two children, on 28 December 2006. He was 25 years old. See Filosa (2006).
  23. I write this with all due caution against overinvestment in the democratizing capabilities that André Bazin (1967) attributed to shots composed with multiple planes in sharp focus presented in long takes such that the spectator's eye, in theory, may rove at will.

24. This affective meaning with which we are left is consolidated in the ending coda. The film's credit sequence is presented as successive images of the people who have appeared, stating their names and identifying information while holding in front of their faces, or being digitally framed by, empty picture frames.
25. Any plan for racially integrated communities would need to be developed with care to maintain existing support networks while combating racist practices and policies.
26. Reference here is to Common Ground Collective, founded by Sharon Johnson, Malik Rahim, and Brandon Darby seven days after Katrina struck in order to 'rebuild the spirit of Southern Louisiana'. See [www.commongroundrelief.org](http://www.commongroundrelief.org)
27. At the time of writing, about 90 units of the Lafitte remain standing but have not been reoccupied. In fact, controversy swirls over whether the charitable and non-profit entities that are supposed to be low-income housing advocates are in fact functioning in that manner.
28. Interview with Susan Neufeldt, PhD, Goleta, California, 5 September 2008.

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