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## When the Wind Blows: The Search for Normalcy During the Hurricanes of 2005

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\* New Orleans, the city was affected by Katrina, and its twin,  
\* Rita, in significant ways. While the eye of neither storm  
\* passed directly over Lafayette, we experienced a cosmology  
\* episode as the effects of back-to-back severe hurricanes made  
\* the world, if only for a short time, less rational and orderly.  
\* Based on personal experience as well as an analysis of student  
\* essays, this article is an attempt to articulate an essence of  
\* a liminal time. Exploring how we attempted to narrate this  
\* crisis can provide insight into the ways language works to  
\* make, and to simultaneously resist, the discursive event of  
\* trauma into a lived experience.

**O**n Wednesday, September 21, 2005, as I was observing a first-year writing class at the University of Louisiana Lafayette (ULL) that was filled with evacuees from New Orleans, I wrote in my field notes:

*Hurricane Rita brewing in the Gulf Coast*

*No one seems to be concerned about Rita, at least they weren't talking about it before class. I don't sense any raised anxiety levels, except my own. I don't know if I am more scared that I am going to leave and not be here to help Troy or that I won't be able to get back if something happens. The most concern I have about the house is the two old trees in the front yard.*

*They lose big branches even during thunderstorms. Class is exceptionally silly today (maybe nervous energy?)*

Then, on Friday, September 25, from Dyersburg TN, I wrote:

*Yesterday, at about 1:30 pm, I became an evacuee as the government issued a voluntary evacuation of Lafayette. What we packed: Maxine, Trevor, Oscar [cats], and Izzy [dog]. Cat food, dog food, litter box, cat litter, 3 pet carriers, 1 rawhide. Goldfish crackers, tortilla chips, peanut butter, pita bread, Pop Tarts, honey roasted peanuts, half a large chocolate chip cookie, three gallons of water purchased last summer in preparation for Hurricane Ivan; cat litter scoop; flashlight; D and C batteries; our fire safe box with our home owner's policy, social security cards, birth certificates, digital camera with pictures I snapped of the inside of our house right before we left, the most recent pay stub from each of our jobs; both our laptops and cell phones; car and wall chargers for cell phones; about 3 days worth of clothes, our medicines; my teddy bear; the 101 papers I collected last week; the reading I assigned for 509; daily planner (with all phone numbers and contact info for people); a bucket; some plastic bags; plastic cups; a blanket; toilet paper; paper towels; \$200 cash; American Express card.*

This inversion of my own subject position—from researcher of evacuees to evacuee researcher—was the beginning of my thinking about the incredible power of natural traumas<sup>1</sup> like hurricanes to completely rupture the fabric of daily life. M.W. Seeger, T. Sellnow, and R.R. Ulmer define a trauma or crisis as:

a specific, unexpected, and non-routine event or series of events that create high levels of uncertainty and threaten or are perceived to threaten high priority goals including security of life and property or the general individual or community well-being. (qtd. in Spence, Lachlan, and Burke 656)

People who experience crisis events often have what is called a “cosmology episode,” an episode that makes “individuals suddenly and deeply feel that their universe is no longer a rational, orderly system” (Spence, Lachlan, and Burke 656).

Even though Lafayette, Louisiana is 150 miles to the west of New Orleans, the city was affected by Katrina, and its twin, Rita, in significant ways. While the eye of neither storm passed directly over Lafayette, we experienced a cosmology episode as the effects of back-to-back severe hurricanes made the world, if only for a short time, less rational and orderly. This article, therefore, is woven from many threads: my experiences as a person who had to evacuate, a teacher who had students who lost everything, an administrator who had to run a writing program in the midst of chaos, and a scholar/researcher who is still struggling to make sense of these events in academic and intellectual language.

### **Setting the Scene**

Before attempting to articulate these experiences, it may be helpful to describe how this study came about. Within one week of Katrina coming ashore, ULL enrolled some 800 students from the New Orleans region. Because so many of the new students were first-years and needed English 101 and because all of our sections were filled with our own students who had started school three weeks earlier, we opened two sections of English 101 specifically for the “New Orleans students.”

On the first day of class for the New Orleans students, Ashley, the instructor, and I waited in the faculty lounge of the English department to welcome them. At 9:00 when the class was about to start, only four students were present even though the class roster showed that 29 students were enrolled. Ashley wondered aloud if the remaining students had been told to go to what would become the permanent classroom in the chemistry building. I ran over to the other building to

see if anyone was waiting. As I opened the door, I was shocked to see about 20 students waiting in the hallway. I offered to walk them back to the English building. As we were walking between the buildings, I suddenly became aware of the significance of what was happening. The students I was leading to the lounge had, less than a week before, been moving into their dorms in New Orleans, about to begin college. I was sure they were filled with the fears and excitement of many typical college freshmen. And now, a few short days later, they were about to start their English class at a school they hadn't chosen, wearing, for many of them, the only clothes they had to their name, living in dorms, or apartments, or homes overcrowded with family and friends, and many of them no longer had a place to call home. Yet, here they were, enrolled in college, determined to continue with their education even though their lives had been turned upside down. "Why are these students here, today? Taking first-year writing?" I asked myself. "This is important. Someone needs to be paying attention to this; someone should be a witness to this."

By the time the five minute walk was over, I decided I was going to be the one to observe and talk to these students. I quickly wrote out my IRB application, secured Ashley's permission to observe her class, and asked the students for their consent to see their writing and interview them.

On a subconscious level, during that walk between the buildings, I was perhaps hoping to investigate how the students were making sense of the trauma they had experienced. But at the time I honestly had no working hypothesis. Because of all the attention turned on the devastation and human suffering in New Orleans, I don't think any of us in Lafayette, residents or evacuees, thought that we had experienced a crisis. We were the fortunate ones who were not in the Superdome. We did not have to be cut out of our attics. We weren't sure our story was worth telling. As I explained my research to one of the New Orleans classes—all students who had evacuated from New Orleans—

the students said "Why do you want to study us? Nothing special happened to us. We are here [in Lafayette]." And on one level they were right. For all intents and purposes, the students who made it to ULL were safe; they didn't even miss a semester of classes. However, with the benefit, now, of two years hindsight, I am able to start making sense out of both the data I collected as well as my particular subject position in the whole process.

In their article, "Presence in Absence: Discourses and Teaching (In, On, and About) Trauma," Peter Goggin and Mary Goggin define trauma as "a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence" (LaCapra, qtd. in Goggin and Goggin 30), and they suggest that "*trauma* can only be tackled/approached/grappled with discursively; it is not until it is spoken/written that trauma is made present" (31). If the experience of trauma can only be conveyed through language, then the time during and immediately after both hurricanes was a pre-literate time for all of us. We were not able to translate our lived experience into words. During this liminal time, the ordinary, the mundane, felt extraordinary in some way. To be performing a normal task, like attending a faculty meeting, felt surreal. Senses were heightened; antennae were up. We felt *something*, but we couldn't name it. The world was the same but different. For a time, the familiar looked skewed; there was something that couldn't be named, something in the air, in the mood, in the environment. The rupture we felt, and it was a feeling that still defies description, was, as Michael Bernard-Donals explains, prior to language (81).

Nevertheless, as I struggle to make sense of both my own and the students' experiences, all I have is language and academic tools, like theory. While we never may be able to fully articulate an essence of this time, I believe that exploring how we attempted to narrate this crisis can provide insight into the ways language works to and, at the same time, resists, making the lived experience of trauma a discursive event.

## The Macabre Carnival

In southern Louisiana, inversions of the social order are not uncommon and happen on a predictable, annual, ritualized level. I am referring, of course, to Mardi Gras—though not the Mardi Gras that has been popularized by the *Girls Gone Wild* videos. I am invoking instead the traditional, Cajun country Mardi Gras that happens off camera. While Mardi Gras celebrations and hurricanes may seem unrelated on the surface—one is, after all, a festival and the other is a natural disaster, both events are linked by their ability to invert the social order as well as the ritualized performances that accompany both. Reading hurricanes through the lens of Mardi Gras, or carnival, helps to foreground the way in which the inversion of the social order caused by the hurricanes created a cosmology episode.

Mardi Gras, or carnival season, begins on Twelfth Night (January 6<sup>th</sup>) and lasts until midnight of the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday. The history of Mardi Gras is long and can be traced back at least to medieval times and carnival. According to Mikhail Bakhtin the logic of carnival is the logic of “inside out,” of the “turnabout,” of “a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings . . . a ‘world inside out’” (11). This turning inside out is precisely what happens during country Mardi Gras as neighbors become masked strangers, honest men become thieves, and respectable citizens perform acts that, at any other time, would mark them as social outcasts.

Carnivals occur on specific dates, usually around religious feasts, and have a definitive beginning and end. Like Mardi Gras, hurricane season begins on a specific date, June 1, and has a specific end point, Oct. 30<sup>th</sup>. While a hurricane season may pass with little or no activity, hurricanes will strike and when they do, much like the activity surrounding a carnival, there is ritualized activity that accompanies them. One ritualized activity, for example, is boarding up the house.

In carnival, revelers mask themselves in order to protect their identities so they can perform mischief without fear of reprisal (Sawin); during a hurricane, people mask their houses with boards and shutters to protect them from the wind and flying debris. Both actions—the masking of revelers and the boarding of houses—are intended as safety measures. Mardi Gras masks also often have symbolic or personal meaning for the reveler (see Sawin). Similarly, it is not uncommon for homeowners who are boarding their homes to personalize the wooden “masks” in some way with either messages or symbols.

Another, perhaps more familiar image of both Mardi Gras and hurricanes is the parade or “run.” In country Mardi Gras, the parade consists of a group of masked men traveling through town on a specific route in order to obtain ingredients for the culminating gumbo. As much of the nation witnessed, especially as Hurricane Rita threatened Houston, hurricane evacuation can also be a parade-like experience as people travel on specifically marked routes to reach the safety of a soft bed and a hot meal. But, during a hurricane run, an ordinary drive becomes extraordinary. During the evacuations for Katrina and Rita, many, many people reported that a two-hour drive took ten or even fifteen hours to complete. And along the evacuation route, people exhibited carnival-like behaviors. In an interview I conducted with 18-year-old Margarita, she shared that while her family sat for hours on Interstate 10, they saw people standing on the side of the highway, urinating in full view of traffic. Other students talked about the sometimes frantic search for gas or food, and many evacuation stories involved the consumption of large amounts of alcohol—another common feature of Mardi Gras.

The carnivalesque rupture of Mardi Gras, though, is different from the rupture precipitated by a hurricane in a crucial way: In carnival, moments of rupture, of the world being turned inside out, lead to a festive spirit and laughter (see Lindahl). Hurricanes, on the other hand, produce the rupture and turning inside out of a carnival, but the end

result is not a festive release of tension and hostility. Folklorist Carl Lindahl suggests that carnival can be this time of disruption to the usual order precisely because there is an order in the disorderliness. In country Mardi Gras, there is a *capitaine* of the Mardi Gras who holds absolute authority over the Mardi Gras participants. While all the participants in the Mardi Gras don masks, the *capitaine* remains unmasked because he has ultimate responsibility for what happens during the run. According to Lindahl, during Mardi Gras, "hierarchy [is] thus supplanted but not subverted" (64). It is this faith in the order the *capitaine* represents that allows for the riders and the spectators to enjoy the disruption of the ordinary because they believe the *capitaine* will keep things from going too far. The *capitaine* is the link between the world of carnival and the everyday.

During and immediately following a hurricane, there is no symbolic *capitaine* to ensure that the rupture will not become too great, that the disorderliness will not become too chaotic, that the world will not turn completely inside-out. This is exactly what happened during the 2005 hurricane season: the world was turned upside down and inside-out, social structures broke down, hierarchies collapsed, and there was no *capitaine* to symbolize safety and order. During Mardi Gras, the *capitaine* can and does intercede if the revelers become too menacing (Lindahl 62). However, in the case of a hurricane, no human being can control the destructive potential of the storm. What we experienced during the 2005 hurricane season in southern Louisiana was a macabre carnival.

### Looking for the *Capitaine*

It was during this macabre carnival that my students and I were searching for a *capitaine*—someone or something to impose, at the very least, symbolic order on the chaos. We were looking for a link between our world of the macabre carnival and the world before the storms. And many of us, myself included, turned to what was familiar, what was safe, what was known. This search for the symbolic



*capitaine*, I believe, is why 800 students were enrolled at ULL within a week of losing their homes. Education, it seems, could fill the role of the *capitaine*. Going to class could provide familiar structure to an otherwise chaotic time. I now believe that this is why I turned to research: Research was safe; it was familiar; it provided a regimen and a link to a time that made sense—a time before the storms.

At the beginning of this article, I shared a detailed list of the items I brought with me when I evacuated to Tennessee. I remember sitting in that Tennessee hotel room thinking that I should use the time to write about my thoughts and feelings about what was happening, to be reflective and profound, to capture the moment of what it felt like to be an evacuee who didn't know what was happening to her home, her friends, and her livelihood. Instead, all I could really bring myself to put into words was a rather mundane list of the things we brought with us. By listing my possessions—perhaps, depending on what the storm did, my sole possessions—I was trying to use language to write control into a situation that was far beyond my control.

The narratives from the students who evacuated New Orleans share a similar pattern. Consider the opening paragraphs of two personal narratives written in response to the prompt to write about a life-changing event.

*After a huge hurricane Katrina, the busy city of New Orleans was terribly destroyed. This hurricane affected me as well as residents of New Orleans. Many family members, jobs, and places of residence have been lost. It really hurts me to see how a large city can be destroyed in such a short period of time. Many people were devastated by this event, and may never be the same again. (Katrina Charles.)*

*There have been a couple of events that have affected my life. One of the biggest and most recent is hurricane Katrina. This*

*event came out of the blue; nobody expected it and from one day to the other our lives were flipped upside down. Many people lost a lot, like houses and cars, but some others lost even more, their lives. Without any notice those who could had to evacuate; some others thought that this hurricane would be like the others. Then there were those who were unfortunate and didn't have enough money to leave (Darien Ruiz).*

While both of these introductions are for a personal narrative essay, what I find interesting about them is that they are mostly written from a distanced, third-person point of view. While Katrina does use “me” twice in her introduction, the overall effect of her introduction is that of a report: Something bad happened in New Orleans and lots of people were hurt. In fact, if you did not know that Katrina was an evacuee, it would be possible to see her self-references as a simple show of empathy for people who experienced something horrible. Likewise, Darien’s introduction has a similar report-like quality, eliding his status as an evacuee. These narratives could have been written just as easily by students in Iowa or Maine as by student evacuees from New Orleans.

It may be easy to dismiss the lack of pathos in these introductions as symptomatic of novice writing. And, if I hadn’t lived the experience of the hurricanes myself, I may have made such a dismissal. Instead, what I see happening in these introductions is novice writers using language in a way they are familiar with—writing disinterested, third-person reports—as an attempt to exert some discursive control over the chaos of their lives. Much like enrolling in school in the wake of losing their homes, these students were trying to establish a link between the familiar world before the storm and the new and overwhelming post-hurricane world by employing a style of writing that was safe, familiar, and rational.

Even when a student attempts to address the current chaos in his life, his narrative focuses on the final few hours before his life changed. Consider the following from Clark Richardson, also a New Orleans evacuee:

*Having to evacuate and basically start a new lie outside of New Orleans has indeed changed me, but before I get into that, I want to take a moment to re-live the last few hours I spent in my house.*

Clark's thesis, that the hurricane has changed him, promises to get at what life has been like for him since leaving New Orleans, but instead, the rest of his essay focuses on his preparations for evacuation.

*Although time was indeed of the essence, after I brushed my teeth I spent some extra time looking in the mirror and trimming my mustache. I find that weird because it didn't really need trimming, but I trimmed it anyway. Now that I think about it, I probably did that because in the back of my mind I knew there was a chance that my house and other valued possessions might be destroyed. For me, just being able to do something normal like shaving in the mirror helped prevent the severity of the situation from getting to me. It gave me the feeling that I would only be gone for a few days and that the condition of my house wouldn't be that bad, maybe just a little wind damage.*

Clark's narrative ends with his family getting in the car and coming to Lafayette. He never does return to the post-hurricane world. Clark does provide some insight, though, into how his actions prior to evacuation were, on the one hand, illogical—trimming his mustache while his family was waiting for him to pack the car—but he also shares how this normally routine action brought him some comfort in the moments before his world would change forever. Clark's narrative

about the last few hours in his home is similar to the laundry list of items I brought to Tennessee; we were both using writing to capture moments in the crisis that we felt we were in control.

According to Goggin and Goggin, first person accounts of trauma—writing trauma—often serve a therapeutic function; “Testimony creates *presence in absence*” (35). If the experience of a crisis or trauma is outside of language, then the trauma or cosmology episode creates a void in one’s life narrative. Testimony, language, while never able to fully capture the essence of an experience provides a means to create a space for that experience to live. “Testimony is ‘a dialogical process of exploration and reconciliation of two worlds—the one brutally destroyed and the one that is—that are different and will always remain so’” (Laub qtd. in Goggin and Goggin 35).

In the days and weeks immediately following Katrina and then again after Rita, I sometimes felt guilty about concerning myself with the minutiae of running a writing program. Who really cares about what handbook the writing program will use next year when there are thousands of people living in your sports arena? Who wants to tell student evacuees that they have to abide by the same attendance policies as the other students or that they have to write their papers in order to pass their English class? But I am beginning to understand that going about these daily activities was important for the faculty, students, staff, and evacuees because, as an institution, we could provide a link to the rational, orderly pre-hurricane world. In many ways, the institution became the symbolic *capitaine* of our macabre carnival by not only imposing order but also by creating a space for us to start making discursive sense out of what happened. The institution helped us create a presence in the absence blown open by the fierce winds, rain, and floods that ruptured our world.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Peter Goggin and Mary Goggin identify three categories of trauma: national, natural, and personal, noting that there can be overlap among the categories. Briefly, a national trauma is in the category of the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon or the assassination of JFK. A natural trauma is an event that is not necessarily malevolent in and of itself but nevertheless causes great suffering and pain as in the recent wildfires in California or, for the purposes of this article, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. And the third category of trauma is personal trauma. Crimes like rape or murder fall into this category. As with all classification schemes, though, the boundaries among the categories are fluid.

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