

## When Life Gives You Lemons: Katrina as Subject

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I am writing from the position of what Stephen North categorizes in *The Making of Knowledge in Composition: Portrait of an Emerging Field* as a practitioner.<sup>1</sup> For practitioners, knowledge in composition is generated not only theoretically or through research—quantitative, qualitative or historical—but also (in fact, primarily) through reflective practice in the classroom. In this paper I would like to make my small contribution to the moldy, waterlogged, wind-whipped, recently erected Katrina Room in what North refers to as the Practitioner's House of Lore.

I titled this paper “When Life Gives You Lemons” (obvious, I know) because it was the first thought that came to mind when our Composition Director at Xavier University suggested a “Writing and Katrina” SCMLA panel. However, it seemed appropriate because when we returned to the classroom in December 2005 (a scant three months or so after America's worst disaster flooded our university and our city) for two compacted, back-to-back semesters (three for the students who attended other universities during our “hiatus”), I was surprised by how much our exhausted, traumatized Xavierites wanted to write. Trying to return to a semblance of normalcy despite ongoing renovations on campus and the utter devastation of surrounding neighborhoods, I gave my first, first-semester composition assignment as usual.

I assigned a narrative essay of approximately 500 words, its point, as stated on my assignment handout, to “focus on a salient event from

your life, distill it to its details, and reflect on how that event fits into the larger picture of your experience.” I like this type of assignment because it obliges students to choose their own topic (I like to emphasize self-direction), because it’s hard to plagiarize, and because it’s easier for them to write in their own voices (which I can then work with) when they’re telling their own stories. On the other hand, I don’t like this assignment because I can wind up with a personal revelation (or confession) of an experience about which I don’t particularly want to read or with which I am not qualified to deal. More importantly, however, I often find that most college freshmen are just too involved with living their lives to be able to reflect on them.

Nonetheless, I assigned the essay. The following class day, when the first student, with an all too familiar expression of distress, raised her hand, I was prepared to offer advice on “choosing a topic” and “focusing your chronology.” However what the student said, and what the other students quickly corroborated, was that she had already written 700 words and was only one quarter of the way through her paper—what should she do? After a moment’s hesitation, I replied, “Write on.” It felt imperative.

I now want to explicate for you a representative narrative example—this one from an out-of-state student, unfamiliar with hurricanes, who became stranded on campus (along with about 350 other students and staff members) when evacuation buses failed to arrive on Xavier’s campus as promised. The student’s 16-page paper—typed, double spaced, 1” margins—is entitled “Life During Katrina.” The student—I’ll call her “K”—begins her essay with a precisely situated entry—*“August 27, 2005: I was trying to get some much needed sleep when my roommate Tiffany’s phone rang at 8:37a.m.”* After a detailed account of the events of the day, the entry concludes, *“Everything was happening so fast. It seemed like just last night we were out partying at some club on the West Bank, and now everyone was leaving in a big hurry.”*

The next entry, dated August 28, 2005, begins to show the naturally arising conflict between life-as-normal and life-as-not that will drive K's narrative to its ultimately reflective conclusion: "*I woke up early in the morning thinking that I was going to be leaving to go to Arkansas, but those plans quickly changed. Come to find out, my bus out of New Orleans had been canceled.*" Drawing on her memory of being trapped in the dorm, she writes, "*As the day went by, I noticed the weather was starting to change.*" Over the next day, August 29, 2005, the naturally arising conflict continues to develop:

*I heard a loud knock at the door around 3:30 in the morning. I looked around and noticed the electricity had gone out because I had gone to sleep with the TV on and the trees were vigorously shaking back and forth. A few hours passed, and I was awakened by a loud noise, which was the elevators going back and forth due to the strong winds. When we went inside one of the rooms, we could see the storm in plain view because the blinds were already up. It looked so **unreal**. It seemed like the wind had picked the water up and was blowing it like a wave. It was so **amazing**, and in a weird way it was pretty. We decided to go to the second floor to my room so we could get a better view of the storm. When we got to my room, I went to the window and **I was just speechless**, because the storm was just **brehtaking**. The water was clear and moving very fast down the street toward Xavier South.*

Notice how K has had to struggle to find words to express her observations: *unreal, amazing, I was just speechless, breathtaking*. At the same time, it is her direct recall of detail that is the more expressive, even contemplative. The wind picking up the water and blowing it like a wave, the clear water moving very fast down the street: these images lead her to the ironic revelation that there is beauty in the power of the storm.

Moreover, her observations on the following day, August 30, 2005, lead her to a naturally arising comparison as the dire nature of her situation begins to become clearer. She writes,

*All I could do was stare at the water and pray that the Lord would pull me out of New Orleans because I didn't know how much I could bear. I grabbed a bag of chips to eat, opened the window, and just stared at the water that was once pretty, but was now brown with all types of junk and living animals inside. I was wondering why the water went up and didn't go down since the storm was long gone.*

Again, notice the precision of K's recollection. It was specifically a bag of chips that she grabbed in order to hold on to life-as-normal against the terrifying images of life-as-not.

When the conflict reaches its natural apogee, that is when K realizes that life-as-not-normal has prevailed, her chronology crystallizes into a terrifying moment, a moment she distills into the details of actual dialogue:

*I went up to one of the police officers and asked, "Why did the water go up?" She turned and looked at me like she was really tired and said, "The levees breeched." I then asked, "Don't New Orleans have pumping systems?" "They're not working," she said. "Well, is someone coming to get us?" "Eventually."*

Recalling this moment, K takes the authority to write in her own conversational, not teacher-directed voice as she asks, "Don't New Orleans have pumping systems?" Imagine the recalled terror and sense of hopelessness reflected not in an authoritative use of her own voice but rather in a loss of surface-error control as K writes about the continuing day: "When everyone found out that *there was water was*

*in the hallways, they started to go to their rooms and to go sleep or to stare at their walls."*

In *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* Elaine Scarry writes that subjecting a person to torture (the primary source of pain in her book) unmakes that person's world.<sup>2</sup> Everything that has been real, actual, existent in that person's world dissolves, fades, dies as the body focuses on dealing with pain. The body in pain must then begin to remake the world. I believe that is what my students were doing: not only telling a compelling story, but also remaking a world with the utmost detail and precision that had literally been unmade, both inside and out.

As K's narrative progresses to its naturally arising denouement, she begins to pull back from her own personal crisis to see a larger picture of her position in the world: *"August 31, 2005: I ran to the last bus because I knew that there would be a long line for the front ones. I turned around and the sight made me feel so sad. All the locals were being held back by soldiers with guns looking at us leave while they had to stay."* Surely the privilege inherent in her status as college student—albeit one attending a minority university on financial aid—had never quite so dramatically revealed itself before.

K concludes the narrative of her harrowing experience with the type of epiphany composition teachers love to read:

*September 2, 2005: We arrived to Grambling at about five in the morning. The Grambling staff passed us some papers so we could let them know where we were going and how we were getting there. As I made my way in, I noticed they had the TV on and that's when I saw it; residents were being rescued via helicopter through their attics. A man was crying about how his wife was gone; people were walking through the*

*dirty water that was filled with everything from dead bodies, rodents, snakes, and alligators. The water had reached twenty five to thirty feet in some of the residents' homes. I then realized no matter how much you think you got it bad, someone has it worse.* Yes, this epiphany can certainly be deemed clichéd, but for K, it is honest and heartfelt, backed up by experience, capably recalled from memory, and finely detailed in writing—so finely detailed that the writer's underlying water motif has progressed from *unreal* to *brown with all types of junk and living animals inside* to the detail expressed in the above passage.

In her presentation entitled “Who Cares? How Do Feminist Ethics, Especially the Ethic-of-Care Theories, Figure Into the Academic Work Ethic?” at the 2006 SCMLA Women’s Caucus Breakfast, Mary Trachsel from the University of Iowa noted her desire to motivate students to write meaningfully rather than as a “circus trick” or as a way to “check off an assignment.” What this exemplary post-Katrina writing has revealed to me—perhaps as dramatically as K’s position of privilege was revealed to her—is just how artificial, how painful, how forced ordinary freshman composition writing can be, and I rededicate myself to finding ways to engage my students in writing that is both constructive and dynamic for them.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Stephen North, *The Making of Knowledge in Composition: Portrait of an Emerging Field* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Heinemann, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987 [1985]).