

## Writing the Wrong: Choosing to Research and Teach the Trauma of Hurricane Katrina

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As I am a New Orleans native and doctoral candidate in the field of rhetoric and composition, Hurricane Katrina has forever impacted both my personal and academic lives. Relying upon the work of Sandra Gilbert and other trauma theorists, this essay presents a microcosm of my dissertation. It offers examples from New Orleans bloggers who chronicle their post-Katrina rebuilding efforts, and analyzes how writing in generative, online spaces calls worldwide attention to a city still suffering. It also reflects upon my attempts to make Hurricane Katrina a teachable moment, and discusses the lessons I have learned when students react without empathy to assigned readings.

*It is remarkable that a city can be both torn asunder and also find a measure of salvation in the same name: Katrina. To the people I spoke with, Katrina is a noun, an adjective and even a verb. But one thing it isn't is simply a hurricane.—Dave Zirin*

Outsiders may struggle to understand Zirin's point, but if you are a New Orleans native like myself, the trauma of Katrina follows you everywhere, even if you didn't experience any water damage and especially if you are not living in New Orleans right now. The guilt of not being there to help—onset by the fact that every New Orleanian I have ever known has had (and is still having) his or her life affected by the storm—is overwhelming. But as a young

academic in the field of rhetoric and composition, I have discovered ways to do my part to find these Katrina stories and have them heard by the academic community.

Ever since 9/11, when what happened on an ordinary workday permanently changed our nation, the media are hypersensitive to react quickly and to bring us the “breaking news” surrounding a disaster from several different locations and camera angles. But when Katrina happened, the levees broke, and water literally got in the way. The newscasters did what they could, but—and I’m no exception—audiences soon became bored with the looped coverage and increasingly frustrated with the slow government response. Anniversary specials and celebrity efforts attempt to keep the story alive on our television screens, but the real stories of post-Katrina living are happening online in the hundreds of locally authored blogs that have begun since the Fall of 2005. In fact, it is through these blogs that anyone can read—by nature of the blog medium as a chronicling one—more complete, longitudinal narratives detailing the processes of recovery. For many transplanted and displaced New Orleanians, reading this type of writing produces what I call the “dot calm effect” because these bloggers are sharing details that the traditional media rarely address yet bring about so much relief for those who are desperate for authentic glimpses of the city they will forever love.

Currently, these examples of online writing are at the core of my dissertation, a work that itself is an example of what literary critic Sandra Gilbert defines as “writing wrong.” By referencing the web postings shared daily by local New Orleanians and Gulf Coast residents, my goal is to illustrate the power with which those with Internet access—a population that continues to grow every year—are “remembering, testifying, and reorganizing” just as they are “reiterating and striving to repair or readjust” (Gilbert 87). As Gilbert’s memoir *Wrongful Death* intends to expose the medical malpractice that killed her husband in a routine surgery, what my examination of these cyber-

literate citizens aims to prove is that their voices have inspired more visible, tangible, and emotional recovery than the government or traditional media ever could accomplish.

Reading the work of these bloggers, who have no qualms about sharing their personal stories of evacuation, relocation, return, and subsequent frustration with living in post-Katrina New Orleans, also proves Gilbert's argument that "the effort to write (record) and right (rectify) wrong involves both fear and ferocity" (87). Take, for example, the writing of a blogger going by the name Gentilly Girl; she has an entire category of posts dedicated to the rebuilding of her home. This is an excerpt of a post written in May of 2007, nearly two years after Katrina hit:

We gave willingly as dutiful citizens, but then there came a storm in August, 2005. Our protections against such storms, promised by the same Nation that was destroying our lands, freakin' damned FAILED, AND MANY OF US DIED OR BECAME HOMELESS. Our world, our little part of it, almost died. Many voices called for our death, but we would not hear them. We are rebuilding OUR land.

Our place almost died. Can you understand that statement? Look around what you perceive as your community being totally gone. Can you stomach that? That your friends, neighbors, shops and eateries are wiped from the face of the Earth? To know that the faces you have known for years are no longer next door or around the corner? To realize that the children (who you hated because of their pranks and noise), are no longer in the place their parents lived in? That they aren't there to remind you of the continuity of culture? That you are no longer a part of the Dance of Life? Can you imagine that in the place where you live? Can you?

While many trauma theorists write about how victims often “actively stop themselves from telling their stories” (DeSalvo 24), Gentilly Girl proves otherwise. The date of her post is significant, particularly as an example that demonstrates Sandra Gilbert’s point that in retelling the tale, she realizes she is “‘still at the same subject,’ still engaged in the same fearful and fierce activity—writing and seeking to right a mortal wrong” (86-87). In fact, Gentilly Girl’s ferocity in always referring to Hurricane Katrina as the “Federal Flood,” a man-made disaster rather than a natural one, pushes readers to recall that it was not the storm’s 125 mph winds but the numerous breaches in the federally built levees that caused the flooding that left eighty percent of the city under water.

As is often the case, what I am researching has found its way into my classroom teaching, and Gentilly Girl’s writing emphasizes the place attachment and social commentary that I find valuable for upper-level creative nonfiction students to discover. Pointing to texts written by various New Orleans-based authors prompts these undergraduates to distinguish how writers from a localized place can attract outside readers by providing extended examples and concretizing the subject matter. When these students then go on to write their own place essays, they must engage in both cultural and self-examination; employ scene-setting, dialogue, and description; and think carefully about audience. Many students have thrived when challenged in this way to reflect upon places and the complex relationships they have with them. I hope that this success is due not only to my asking them to write in a way they have never been asked to before but also because I have set an example through my passion for my hometown and its recovery after Hurricane Katrina.

Sharing these Katrina-related blog posts with my students has not always been easy, though, even at a Florida university where one would expect the students to have some familiarity with the woes of hurricane evacuation, FEMA, and coastal erosion. I was shocked when a student assigned to respond to an essay by New Orleans newspaper writer,

Chris Rose, wrote: "Katrina was not the worst thing to ever happen. The people who stayed there got what they deserved... Common sense seems to escape many of the people living there. I, for one, do not care to hear about this rubbish. Whining never gets anyone anywhere." Knowing the student who wrote this was very much aware that my own parents had evacuated and still lost everything upset me greatly, but I stepped back and reevaluated both my lesson plan and her writing as just that, an academic text. The latter's flaws are obvious; this student gave no support to her opinion, made hasty generalizations, and inaccurately summarized Rose's text. However, as a teacher and researcher also dealing with survivor's guilt, I became insecure and began questioning my place project—was I forcing my students to read too much Katrina-related prose? Was I asking them to think about something they did not want to consider, and was that why some reacted with emotional, visceral, and underdeveloped responses?

Before I returned this set of papers and opened my office door for a meeting with this student to discuss how to frame an analytical reader response rather than one laden with a judgmental tone (something this particular student went on to do in subsequent essays, even those having nothing to do with Hurricane Katrina), I turned to the WPA-listserv with my questions hoping to elicit advice from fellow compositionists. Many responses came from across the nation and all reminded me to distance myself, especially since such lack of compassion pains me personally, and try to see the issue from the student's point of view. Because I had invited my students to speak their minds, this was a successful exercise if this student truly felt comfortable in making these remarks. However, there is always a lesson in audience to be learned. Because I am the grader, perhaps future assignments like these, where emotionally charged writing can result, can be better discussed in small groups where their peers can quickly evaluate the writing and offer alternative reactions. Allowing such discussions to happen makes these moments teachable ones, and if I plan to continue to include trauma-related readings, I need to prepare

myself and my students to distinguish between compassionate and disparaging uses of tone as argumentative strategies.

Ultimately, this incident reminded me once again of the value of expressing one's trauma. Again referencing Louise DeSalvo, "Often...trauma remains undisclosed because, though people would like to discuss it, they can't or won't because they fear punishment, embarrassment, or disapproval or because they can't find an appropriate audience" (24). If I were to purposefully censor my course and not include Katrina stories, then I would be silencing the voices, including mine, of people who so desperately need to be heard. Still, I am currently revising my lesson plan to include a greater range of readings—not just those written in a literary nonfiction style—so as to contextualize the event. While my previous focus had been on powerful narratives that evoked emotions, I feel students may respond more positively (and perhaps more sympathetically) if also exposed to texts that demonstrate the historical, economic, and racial inequalities that lie just beneath the surface and under the guise of a natural disaster. As my student proved, it is easy to judge people when they are a faceless group, but when you actually hear the stories—stories that cross all racial and class lines—many of those judgments no longer make sense.

I feel fortunate to have the opportunity to apply my academic background in order to forge ahead with a scholarly examination of such a national event. As sociologist and communications scholar Carolyn Ellis writes in her 1995 book *Final Negotiations*, "It seems sensible to make a project out of this, to pretend that something positive is happening. Writing soothes me. Recording the events frees my mind and body to relax. Knowing that the details are recorded keeps me from going over and over them, to see if I can force a different outcome" (Ellis 153). Hers is a heartbreaking story of her relationship with a man who is dying of emphysema, and while it is a story of losing a partner, it is also the story of Ellis living dual lives—one of caretaker

and the other of young academic. Her words so fittingly apply to my experience as a transplanted New Orleanian feeling helpless yet driven to make some sense of the disaster, which is why I knew I had to dedicate my dissertation to exploring Hurricane Katrina and the public writing that has come out of it. While this dissertation may be more personal than most, and could be critiqued for its emotional examples and liberal use of the first person, like *Gentilly Girl*, I could not deny myself the chance to write about the impact of the storm upon my life.

Just as we will all see firsthand at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in April, New Orleans is still a city that celebrates its local culture whenever possible. Its literary tradition may be familiar to most of us, but I encourage all of us who appreciate authentic discourse communities and writing groups to take a new look at the city, particularly as it creates ways to pursue the long road of recovery it still has ahead of it.

### Works Cited

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