

Can We Ever See Their Faces?

An Exploration of Hurricane Katrina Memorializations

By

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Abstract

In this thesis, I explore three case studies of Hurricane Katrina media: a poem by Patricia Smith, an art gallery installation piece by Rontherin Ratliff, and a situation video created by John Lucas with a voice-over from Claudia Rankine. I explore the methods and forms that artists use to counter the dominant narrative that was quickly crafted about Katrina. As I move from most formally conventional to most formally intricate examples, I argue that there are limitations to what kinds of trauma can be represented, what forms are best suited for this endeavor, and what must remain unknown to spectators. I analyze the power that memorializations of Katrina have on the historicization of the event and its forgetting. My thesis is divided into three chapters, each of which focuses on one of the aforementioned Katrina media. Within these chapters, I use ideas from a range of theoretical backgrounds including Holocaust trauma studies, biopolitics, ecocriticism, and counterdocuments and counterhistories, among others. Ultimately, I argue that there is no perfect combination of forms or media that encapsulates the trauma, erasure, oversimplification, and heartbreak that Katrina created. Instead, I finish with the knowledge that my questions have not been satisfied, but they have morphed as a result of my months of close reading and analysis. As my thesis concludes, I am struck by the need for radical, genuine empathy because there is always that which cannot be represented by media.

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Short Titles

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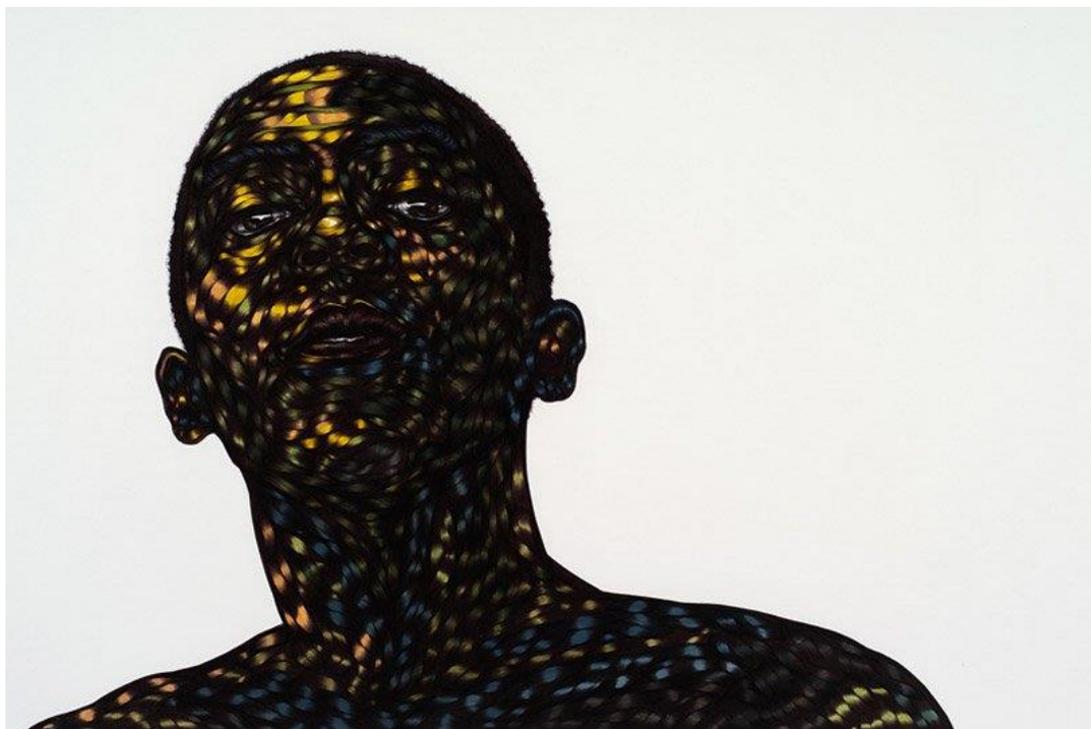
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Preface

This project was born out of a singular question I read my freshman year of college that has yet to relinquish its grasp on my academic curiosities and, on some level, my conscience and heart. In one of the most eye-opening reads of my career, Claudia Rankine's text *Citizen: An American Lyric* has a section entitled "August 29, 2005/ Hurricane Katrina" in which she incessantly demands of her readers "have you seen their faces?"¹ Against the backdrop of Hurricane Katrina, Rankine addresses the tension between the hypervisibility that black and brown survivors experienced during the disaster as their every action was criminalized, along with the heartbreaking invisibility they endured as the particulars of their experiences were marginalized once the media decided Katrina had saturated their channels long enough. At the end of this episode in *Citizen*, Toyin Oduola's pen ink portrait *Uncertain, yet Reserved* depicts the outline of a man's head and shoulders.



Toyin Oduola. *Uncertain, yet Reserved*. 2012. Acrylic ink and pen ink on board.

¹ Claudia Rankine. *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Greywolf Press, 2014, p. 89.

Beyond this outline, though, it is impossible to discern any details because the subject's body is a collage of blues, browns, blacks, and yellows that morph his individual identity. Presumably, Rankine chooses to include this portrait because *Uncertain, yet Reserved* visually encapsulates the tension within the Katrina episode: simultaneous hypervisibility and invisibility. In my first response to *Citizen*, I attempted to conquer the multimodal text, which I completed with little satisfaction. The list of what fell beyond the parameters of that first paper was endless. I knew the questions *Citizen* mounted could not be resolved in that particular paper and that they necessitated further academic inquiry— if nothing else, because I was frustrated by what felt like a mediocre response to a question I was obsessed with. If only for myself, I needed more. I felt (and still feel) an obligation to the particulars of Katrina narratives that demand more than casual interaction. The questions these works raise about truth, empathy, and memorializations are significant. I cannot let them rest. At least not yet.

On a meta level, Gertrude Stein's writing and style inform both my skepticism of the written word and the caliber of the questions I pose. I was struck by Stein's use of the word "really," how her insistence on the reality of experience undermines the authenticity of the world she represents and creates space for doubt.² Out of this discussion, my interest in the inherent failings of a text that presumes itself to be an accurate retelling of truth— and what truth even looks like in the face of impressionable, fleeting, emotional moments— was born.

Beyoncé's visual album *Lemonade* further complicated my preoccupations because of its intertextual representations of embodied trauma. Throughout my years studying literature, I kept finding myself enamored by—almost obsessed with— ideas of reality, visibility, and representation. I was not satisfied by the formulations I worked through in short papers, which is

² Gertrude Stein. "Melanctha." *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, Penguin Random House, 1990.

why, in part, I could not let them rest. Out of the culmination of my frustrations, my thesis project was born.

Frankly, one aspect of this project that I have struggled with the most is the responsibility and gravity of undertaking such work. I am tormented by the implications my work will have, how I am not adequately challenging scholarly gatekeeping, and the ways I contribute to the trauma that Katrina victims and marginalized folks experience. At the outset, I was nearly paralyzed by the fear that I would do more detriment to this community and this scholarly discussion than any benefit I could offer from my nascent academic stance. How could I understand the plight of victims, of marginal folks, of people who have a connection to this geographic space, this victim narrative, this trauma? How could I engage in a non-voyeuristic, non-predatory relationship with relevant media? By working through these questions, I displaced my interest from the particulars of Hurricane Katrina to traumatic representations generally and the limitations of media with respect to moments of social rupture. Certain, specific Hurricane Katrina representations are the exemplary occasions on which my analysis is built. With this in mind, I craft my arguments with the utmost care, compassion, respect, and as much context as possible to mitigate the damage that a casual spectator in another's trauma causes. And yet, like the writers and artists I engage, I undertake this with the recognition that there will always be an oversight. I can only hope my readers recognize my attempt not to compound the harm these victims experience, and that my readers give me the benefit of the doubt. I am still working to ensure that I have seen their faces.

Introduction

My project focuses on the representations and methods of memorialization that artists created in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. I am intensely interested in the different forms that artists employ to represent a cataclysmic disaster, one that entirely ruptured communities, forced complex social issues often ignored in mainstream society to the forefront, and was historicized problematically. Even providing a factual overview is an exercise fraught with difficulties and biases, systemic inequalities in top-down histories, and general uneasiness with using one account of an event as the codified historical record. And yet, some baseline must be established as the official record against which the radical Hurricane Katrina media forms work. This is the same problem that the survivors and the artists experience and must work to overcome.

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina made its second landfall, this time as a Category 3 storm, in southeast Louisiana and Mississippi. While the count of the total lives lost is contested, upwards of 1,245 people died. In New Orleans, an engineering flaw in the levees resulted in their failure and caused unprecedented flooding. The levee breach caused most of deaths in this area. Ultimately, over eighty percent of the city flooded and the toxic floodwater lingered for weeks. Despite the nearly singular attention afforded to New Orleans, Gulfport, Mississippi, and other beachfront towns encountered the most furious hurricane winds; there, homes, businesses, casinos, and boats were destroyed. The aid and rebuilding process was fraught with issues of access, negligence, and systemic inequality. ABC's reporting on Katrina exemplifies the oversimplification that distorted an understanding of the event: "while ABC was reporting on the Mississippi Gulf Coast in 2010, they treated Hancock County as though it was representative of the entire Coast, ignoring the ongoing struggle in places like Gulfport and

Biloxi— located in neighboring Harrison County— where recovery has not been fully realized.”³ In the weeks following Katrina, the vast majority of the growing criticism focused on the mismanagement of relief efforts, the lack of preparation, and the government’s ineptitude. Many felt that the victims’ racial identities contributed to the government’s passivity, lack of foresight, and negligence; some argued that had the victims been white, rather than primarily black and brown, government relief efforts and evacuation plans would have been preventative rather than reactive.⁴

A central concept in this thesis is my notion of the dominant narrative or official history, which necessitates a brief explanation. Hurricane Katrina transformed from a natural disaster to a signifier of the sociopolitical undercurrents in the United States that white America had previously ignored. Katrina emphasized these issues because of the identities of those impacted by the storm, ignored by government relief efforts, and both sensationalized and marginalized by media coverage of the storm. Within a short period of time, everyone knew what Hurricane Katrina signified— mainly “poverty, racism, and government ineptitude. And perhaps reducing the storm and its effects to a series of basic talking points stymied and pigeon-holed the Katrina narrative.”⁵ The speed at which the media created a cohesive narrative damaged and continues to injure the impacted communities along the Gulf Coast. Media analysts yearn for a complete story arc that fits within the accepted bounds of what disaster reporting *should* encompass. These are the parameters in which the dominant narrative was forged; the dominant narrative decides which kinds of victims are emphasized, what geographic spaces receive coverage, and how

³ Mary Ruth Marotte and Glenn Jellenik. *Ten Years After Katrina: Critical Perspectives of the Storm’s Effect on American Culture and Identity*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015, pp. 81.

⁴ Celeste-Marie Bernier. “You Can’t Photograph Everything”: The Acts and Arts of Bearing Witness in Joseph Rodriguez’s *Still Here: Stories after Katrina*, 2008. Pp. 536- 553. Gilmore, Leigh. “Refugee-Citizen: Mediating Testimony through Image and Word in the Wake of Hurricane Katrina.” *A/B Auto/Biography Studies*, vol. 32, no. 3, *EBSCOhost*, 2017. Pp. 673-81.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 224.

recovery efforts are framed. Inherently, there is an oversimplification when a complex disaster with layers of sociopolitical, racial, gendered, and historical identities is reduced to a sound clip on a news channel or a neat story arc for spectators. These misrepresentations are the space from which I investigate how people are challenging the official history and asserting their own Katrina narrative.

The dominant narrative indisputably informs how Katrina survivors and spectators conceptualize and represent this disaster in various literary, artistic, and cultural productions. At the outset of this project, I limited my scope to productions created by survivors. Since the oversimplification of the Katrina narrative is central to my queries, it seemed logical to prioritize their voices in counterhegemonic narratives. Yet this distinction, much like that between the Gulf Coast and New Orleans, became less significant as I explored reactive media. As I grew more frustrated with the reproduction of Katrina's dominant narrative, I realized that other people across the country who watched the unfolding live broadcast of Katrina felt a similar sense of distrust. Thus, I widened my scope to include projects by folks who did not experience the storm firsthand, but who nevertheless challenge the official record of Katrina.

Within my thesis project, I focus three chapters on three distinct media representations of Hurricane Katrina, which I will outline briefly below. One of the most challenging aspects of my thesis was the selection process of some projects at the cost of others. I focus on a work of poetry, an art gallery installation, and a multimodal video montage. These are the pieces that wounded me in the Barthesian sense.⁶ From my project's inception, I recognized that I would never be able to describe, or even catalog, the formal range of Katrina memorializations. I

⁶ As Roland Barthes postulates in his text *Camera Lucida*, every photograph has two components: the studium and the punctum. While the studium is the interpretation of the photograph's visual components, the punctum is the indescribable, often unknown aspect of the photograph that wounds the viewer and makes some photographs personally charged, lingering in one's memory, in contrast to other photographs which have no punctum and are merely interesting in their aesthetics.

acknowledge the confines within which my project lives— the forms I chose are merely a sampling of the range that constitutes Hurricane Katrina media. Some meaningful projects pioneered because of the vacuum Katrina created are databases that serve, among other functions, as memorializations of the pre-Katrina memoryscape, or as community resource directories for survivors who need support.⁷ Despite the power of these projects, traditional forms like fiction,⁸ documentary film,⁹ and gallery collections¹⁰ are more prevalent in mainstream Katrina media. The formal diversity of Hurricane Katrina projects made the selection process incredibly difficult; I felt a weight about what works were outside the scope of my argument and the impact that my analysis or lack thereof would have for pieces fighting for a say in how Katrina should be and will be remembered.

The examples I use in my thesis attempt to bridge the gap between an experience and the inadequacies of its representation. This is a project that centers around representations of a disaster that was so complicated, traumatic, and devastating that artists and survivors endlessly struggle to encapsulate, give voice to, and create space for an event that ruptured realities. In my attempt to describe the examples in my chapters, I reproduce this very challenge. As artists move beyond or between the written word to other mediums more suited to their experiences of trauma, I assigned myself the inherently challenging task of moving these forms back into the written word. As a result, I experience the same limitations of transcription when describing the media I encounter. To offset the loss that is inescapable when one describes visual art or experiential art, I include images of the works that I analyze throughout my chapters. Moreover,

⁷ While my thesis does not analyze databases as a media representation or response, it is noteworthy to remark upon the influence of projects like the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank and the Katrina Warriors Network and the aid, support, and preservation of memory they offer.

⁸ Such as Jesmyn Ward's novel *Salvage the Bones*.

⁹ Such as David Simon and Eric Overmyer's drama entitled *Treme* and Spike Lee's work entitled *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*.

¹⁰ For example, the exhibit at the New Orleans Museum of Art entitled "10 Years Gone."

I embed video clips so my readers can hear the soundscape of a poem or see the video as it progresses. I hope my brief overviews and dispersed detailing of each media demonstrate where I focus my engagement without overwhelming or under-informing my reader.

The three pieces that I evaluate advance my analysis from a project with relatively straightforward form to a creation with numerous formal layers. In my first chapter, I analyze Patricia Smith's documentary poem "34" to examine the truth value attributed to some media and denied to others. Through a careful consideration of "34," I consider the tension that results from the poem's refusal to submit to a binary of fact and fiction. My second chapter explores Rontherin Ratliff's multi-media art installation *Things That Float*, which emphasizes the small-scale traumas associated with Katrina. In response to its formal and media strategies, I ponder the implications of the loss of communal spaces and the vulnerability of talismans of memory. My third chapter ruminates on the situation video created by artist John Lucas with a voice-over by poet Claudia Rankine. I challenge the ease with which public memory is crafted, memorialized, and codified; I delve into the limitations of media forms individually and their possibilities when they are consumed in the aggregate. Ultimately, these examples reformulate my queries and assumptions about representations of trauma and memorializations of disasters—I focus on the appeals these projects make of viewers, how they transform their audiences to witnesses, and the empathetic response that genuine engagement with them demands. As an audience, how do we responsibly consume these kinds of projects? What kind of witnessing do we enact? Is empathy a bridge between these representations and survivors' lived experiences?

What Counts as Truth?

1.

I believe Jesus is hugely who He says he is:
The crook of an arm,
a shadow threatening my hair,
a hellish glare beneath the moonwash,
the slapping storm that wakes me,
the washing clean.

2.

The Reaper has touched his lips to my days,
Blessing me with gray fragrance and awkward new skin.
What makes the dust of me smell like a dashed miracle,
the underside of everything?
What requires me to hear the bones?

Patricia Smith "34" from *Blood Dazzler*



Above is an excerpt from Patricia Smith's poem entitled "34" from her collection *Blood Dazzler*. This poem focuses on the St. Rita Nursing Home victims who were not evacuated prior to Hurricane Katrina's landfall and drowned in the oncoming flood. In this poem, Smith speculates on the final thoughts of those who did not survive the storm. The poem's second speaker realizes that death is upon her, that the Reaper impatiently hovers near, and she asks why her fate will be "the underside of everything". The speaker recognizes the insignificance of her death on broader discussions of Katrina's damage. She believes her death will be in the background of conversations like those about failed evacuation plans, inept institutions, and other criticisms. In the speaker's own brutal estimation, her death is not the central to these discussions but on the underside of it. Even more agonizingly, this subject addresses a central question for the forthcoming analysis. Who is "require[d]...to hear the bones" of those who cannot retell their Katrina narrative? Who is obligated to bear witness? What kinds of representation demand witnessing? And what forms allow an auditory experience of witnessing? These questions are some of the general inquiries that drive my exploration of Smith's poem.

Although Smith's volume *Blood Dazzler* centers around Hurricane Katrina, she did not experience the storm firsthand. Rather, she witnessed the disaster as did much of America—through the televised coverage of the disaster that mainstream news outlets like FOX and NBC portrayed.¹¹ Despite Smith's geographic removal from the storm, she felt a responsibility to the victims and their suffering, which she expresses in this volume of poetry.¹² In a qualification for this volume, Smith explains that she frequently assumes other identities in her poetry and imagines the experiences her figures endured. Simply, part of her imaginative method is, on some level, appropriation. In "34," Smith delves into the final thoughts of thirty-four St. Rita nursing home residents who died in the rising floodwater. This poem is an exemplary piece of Katrina media that challenges the truth typically associated with documentary work and denied to poetry. Smith's poem conflates fiction and fact and offers one possible representation of what these final moments were like for those who endured them.

At the beginning of this chapter, the stanzas on the left are excerpted from Patricia Smith's poem "34". Within *Blood Dazzler*, Smith tracks the formation of the storm and its destruction in New Orleans. Smith adopts various personas throughout this collection: the failing and inept politicians, the dead and the dying, survivors, and even that of the hurricane itself. Some of these voices are a matter of public record, such as remarks from former First Lady Barbara Bush or the account of withheld aid by Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco. Yet other voices are heavily crafted by Smith, such as her personification of Hurricane Katrina or her speculation on the deceased's thoughts, as in "34". Above, the screenshot on the right is of Yahoo News' webpage the Tuesday after Katrina made landfall in New Orleans. The news

¹¹ Regina Longo. "Bernie Cook Reflects on Katrina Media at the Ten-Year Mark in *Flood of Images: Media, Memory, and Hurricane Katrina*." *Film Quarterly*, vol. 68, no.4, 2015, pp. 90.

¹² Cristine Arreola. "Patricia Smith Didn't Want Anyone to Forget to Hurricane Katrina, So She Wrote 'Blood Dazzler.'" *Bustle*, August 26, 2019.

agency Associated Press identifies the black women holding bags of groceries as “looters” who took “merchandise away from a wind damaged convenience store.” The demonization of survivors is not evenly distributed amongst Hurricane Katrina victims; unsurprisingly, this language was used to characterize black and brown survivors, but not their white counterparts. The Yahoo news article is merely an example of the different mass media I reference in this chapter. Such damaging news articles, photographs, and captions—multiplied beyond counting—are the official record against which Smith crafts her poetry and creates speakers who nuance the version of events the media perpetuated after the storm.

In a comparison between “34” and news coverage of the hurricane, there is an overwhelming urge to create a binary to explain their relationship. I was tempted to simplify my analysis into a neater categorization, one of fiction vs. fact or authentic vs. inauthentic. Yet this is a limiting approach that confines the complexities with which “34” demands reckoning. One of the most detrimental aspects of this binary is its failure to consider the various mediations that construct the poem. *Blood Dazzler* is a physical text, yet I encountered this poem as an independent piece online. I also watched Smith perform the poem via a recording on YouTube, adding another layer of mediation. Within the poem, Smith assumes distinct personas of the victims of the St. Rita Nursing Home flood. As a result of the various kinds of knowledge and spaces of encounter that informed Smith’s poetry, it is impossible to reduce this poem to a binary of fact vs. fiction. There are too many mediators, too many perspectives, biases, and artistic influences upon which Smith draws. The piece requires thoughtful consideration of its complicated construction and dissemination, which defy neat categorization. Initially, I struggled with my understanding of the poem because the parameters I worked within hindered my

explanations rather than expanding them. I limited myself, even at the syntactical level, by the confines of the binary I had created.

As I move my focus beyond the binary, past the futile argument about what makes for authentic vs. inauthentic work, I return the tension of binary categorization to the poem itself because this is not a problem that the reader or I must resolve. Rather, its power invites the reader to consider the limitations of binary categorization for the work “34” attempts. Smith’s poem is deeply committed to tension: the tug between fact and fiction, between authentic and inauthentic, since these distinctions are direly consequential for the memory of Katrina. In turn, the way Katrina is remembered impacts this distinction. Both the historic record and cultural memory are cultivated productions that assume their shape from the accepted and perpetuated versions of an event. As the scholar Eloisa Valenzuela-Mendoza articulates, the process of creating a history or an archive is entangled with “a promise to preserve the memories of past events and peoples. However, the method of preservation creates a ‘hierarchy of memories’ and within this system certain remembrances are lost, or disregarded.”¹³ Simply, what is remembered, placed within the codified history of an event, or what survives in the cultural memory, is not accidental. The effects of validation and marginalization create the tension “34” inhabits as much as the tension informs this sorting mechanism. The binary I initially sought to resolve remains important, but it is important because Smith’s work urges a reckoning with the implications of crafting a binary in the face of nuanced, complicated disasters. In other words, it is not the aim of my analysis to resolve the tension of this binary, but rather to inhabit the uncomfortable space that movement beyond it creates and explore why this tension is consequential.

¹³ Mary Ruth Marotte and Glenn Jellenik. *Ibid.*, pp. 73.

The interplay Smith crafts between the official record of the event and her speculative representation of the residents' thoughts is one of the first tensions readers encounter, from the very outset. Before the poetic stanzas begin, Smith opens with the following statement:

ST. BERNARD PARISH, La., Sept. 7 (UPI)— Thirty-four bodies were found drowned in a nursing home where people did not evacuate. The more than half of the residents of St. Rita's nursing home, 20 miles southeast from downtown New Orleans, died Aug. 29 when floodwaters from Hurricane Katrina reached the home's roof.

Smith begins "34" with this excerpt from the syndicate news service United Press International (UPI) about St. Rita's nursing home. These curt sentences are part of the dominant narrative, codified in the official record because of UPI's reputation as a news service based in Louisiana with an international readership. The language of this excerpt describes these tragic deaths as "thirty-four bodies" in a distant, almost scientific tone which exemplifies its conformity to journalistic prose. As a convention of the genre, the statement does not editorialize or remark upon the inhumanity of the caretakers who left their charges at the mercy, or rather lack thereof, of Katrina. Rather, UPI conveys the tangible fallout from Katrina and the flooding where "people did not evacuate" from the nursing home. Instead of describing the trauma other residents experienced as they watched their friends die, the article presents the outcome of this decision. Moreover, the first two sentences emphasize St. Rita's proximity to the geographic space of Katrina— "20 miles southeast from downtown New Orleans"— to suggest its indisputable immediacy to New Orleans, the media's selected epicenter of Katrina suffering.

Despite the expectations associated with journalistic prose, this excerpt raises more questions than it answers about the specifics of the tragedy at St. Rita's nursing home. As I will discuss later, even the basic facts reported in these few sentences are inaccurate, despite the

piece's implied claims to its truth— thirty-five people died when the floodwaters breached the nursing home, not thirty-four. At the most rudimentary level of event reporting, this excerpt misrepresents reality which could result from the difficulty of getting a participant's— or survivor's— perspective about the rapidly changing circumstances surrounding this event. Although UPI did not deliberately obfuscate the events at St. Rita Nursing Home, journalism is habitually read for its truth value and thus infrequently regarded as a fallible genre, which complicates its role during an evolving situation that demands revisions in light of more information. In particular, the news syndicate uses bizarrely vague language, seemingly hesitant to assert a strong voice about the details of this crisis. Perhaps most troubling, the article passively describes the “nursing home where people did not evacuate.” One immediately wonders what the circumstances were surrounding the decision to stay— were these people bedridden or otherwise physically unable to move with ease? Did the nursing home staff think themselves and their charges immune from the storm? Or were the residents abandoned by their caretakers without a way to get to safety? The piece supposedly informing its audience does not provide these answers. In a statement meant to clarify, to inform others about the tragedy, such statements only befuddle the reader with evasions and a remarkable lack of information.

This excerpt, its tone and the inclusion of the article's lead which reads “ST. BERNARD'S PARISH, La., Sept. 7 (UPI)” signals that the following three lines are from a journalistic source that asserts the validity of what Smith's stanzas fictionalize, despite its lack of concrete information. Immediately following the UPI excerpt, Smith begins the poem as a numbered list, from one to thirty-four. Each numbered stanza represents each of the nursing home residents who perished. The contrasting formal features emphasize the distinct genres of the epigraph and the stanzas of “34”. Smith's stanzas are her speculation, her representation of

the dead's final thoughts, as opposed to the official, journalistic statement that supposedly reports the tangible, material aspects of the disaster: the number of deaths, the location, the date.¹⁴ In this way, Smith structures the poem to highlight the difference between the officially reported facts in the prose and her representation of the subjectivities of the dead in the poetic form.

The personal histories crafted in "34" indicate the kinds of individual experiences Katrina curtailed in contrast to the strict journalistic facts and statistics of the historical record. Some of Smith's most striking stanzas are those that detail the past lives of the dead and their particularities. One stanza offers homeopathic medical advice, something that reminds me of my own grandmother's approach to illness: "to cool a fever, rub the sickness with wet earth. / for swelling, boil a just plucked chicken / and douse the hurt in the steam."¹⁵ I envision an old woman, cozy and plump, with weathered hands and deep-set eyes, explaining her tried and true remedies that her mother passed down to her. From this stanza, I imagine a lineage of histories for this particular speaker, generations of inherited cures that were obliterated by the speaker's death. Smith constructs some stanzas in reference to the speaker's family and external links, which reminds readers that this suffering does not exist in isolation. Speaker twenty-nine asserts her participation in society, her significance to a partner or lover despite her abandonment during the storm: "I had the rumble hips, I tell ya./ I was slingback and press curl/ and big titties with necessary milk./ I was somebody's woman,/ I was the city where the city wasn't."¹⁶ This speaker claims her energetic and stylish youth, a period in an elderly person's life that is frequently forgotten, in her reference to her sling-back heels and carefully curled hair. Moving beyond her

¹⁴ As I previously explained, even tangible figures of disaster are not stable. Thirty-five, not thirty-four, residents perished in St. Rita's nursing home. Despite the way the UPI article asserts its geographic proximity to the disaster, the article misrepresented what occurred and codified it in their public account of the casualties of this disaster.

¹⁵ Patricia Smith. "34." *Blood Dazzler: Poems*. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2008. Stanza 9.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, stanza 29.

lively youth, she asserts her centrality in her child's life as a mother and caretaker. Most overtly, the speaker demands recognition as part of a collective, a group of folks who saw her as important, unique, and worthy with her declaration that she "was somebody's woman." She asserts her life-force, her essentiality in others' lives, since she "was the city where the city wasn't"—a nod towards the failure of the city and its institutions, and the way she, in its absence or neglect, assumed these roles and responsibilities. In many stanzas, Smith constructs vivid histories that assert the residents' particular lives before their death at St. Rita's; these are merely two powerful examples of Smith's craft.

The reality that "34" suggests is one scenario out of innumerable possibilities, none more valid than another but all imaginatively accessible and compelling. Though Smith affords her voice to the voiceless, this does not detract from the truth value of her work. Rather, it raises questions about what forms can claim truth and what these truths look like. One of the most relevant definitions for Smith's truth emanates from the questions the filmmaker Jill Godmilow poses in an interview. Godmilow demands "is telling the truth to tell everything? Is it simply not to lie? Or to not get something wrong? Or is it to find a form that... illuminates the material, making possible a clearer or entirely new understanding?"¹⁷ One kind of truth in "34" is its production of intimate, emotionally meaningful experiences on behalf of the dead. Smith attributes an intense emotional range to her stranded figures, emphasizing the residents' disbelief in their fate, their panic, and their fear. One speaker explains "they left us. Me. Him. Our crinkled hands. /...they left us to our God, / but our God was mesmerized elsewhere, / watching his rain," to highlight the sense of abandonment the residents felt by their caretakers, society, and even God.¹⁸ This is a heartbreaking stanza because the residents know they have been at best

¹⁷ Jill Godmilow and Ann-Louise Shapiro. "How Real is the Reality in Documentary Film?" *History and Theory*, vol. 36, no. 4, 1997, pp. 92.

¹⁸ Smith, *Ibid.*, stanza 30.

forgotten and at worst sacrificed. Smith implores her readers accept the gut-wrenching emotional depth that the stanzaic speakers' grief for themselves offer as a deep truth, untouched by official narratives.

Other academics posit that it is not entirely clear which kinds of texts are best suited to help audiences understand Katrina, challenging conceptions about truth alongside Godmilow. Eric Overmyer, co-producer of the Katrina drama *Treme*, argues that “fiction provide[s] a necessary opportunity to re-create and restage that which could not be captured by cameras and mics” in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.¹⁹ Smith's poem lives in this liminal space since she rejects a reliance on documentary evidence in her creation of an emotional truth. One of these emotional truths that “34” speculates on is the utter sense of abandonment by one's kin. One speaker explains that “son don't rise,/ daughter don't know enough to dial a phone./ Gets harder to remember/ how my womb folded because of them... See what they have done,/ how hard and sweet they done dropped me here?”²⁰ This speaker epitomizes parental sacrifices: a lifetime of selflessness taken for granted and the grief of being forgotten by their children after placement in a facility. The shattered parent-child relationship begets an intense sorrow—just one of the different iterations of mourning that readers encounter throughout the poem. In her use of such voices, Smith embodies Holocaust scholar Michael Rothberg's ideas on meaningful representations wherein art is only beholden to its need to “remain true to suffering.”²¹ In Rothberg's formulation, art is not confined by the particular details or facts of an event. Rather, artistic freedom necessitates and enables deviations from these accounts to privilege a representation that rings true to the suffering an event causes. While Smith's poetry does not

¹⁹ Bernie Cook. “My Fiction Seems a Bit Inconsequential to Me Now: *Treme*'s Truth Claim” *Flood of Images Media, Memory, and Hurricane Katrina*, 10 Jan. 2015, pp. 306.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, stanza 5.

²¹ Michael Rothberg. *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation*, University of Minnesota Press, 2000. ProQuest Ebook Central, pp. 40.

draw from recordings, it offers an emotional encounter which is a version of truth so far as readers have the capacity to engage with this abandonment and intense, speculative grief.

Smith's speculation about the nursing home residents' last thoughts is not without precedent as it moves into the nascent space of documentary poetics. One of the most relevant examples of this genre is Saidiya Hartman's book, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*. While Hartman's work does not take the form of poetry, she manipulates documentary conventions, something in which "34" is also invested; for this reason, I will engage Hartman's approach at length. Methodologically, she "recreate[s] the voices and use[s] the words of these young women [who are the key subjects of her study] when possible and inhabit[s] the intimate dimensions of their lives. The aim is to convey the sensory experience of the city" in which the women lived. This account justifies how Hartman "elaborates, augments, transposes, and breaks open archival documents so they might yield a richer picture."²² At the core of Hartman's project is the dearth of intimate, personal information about the lives of young black women within archival records such as court documents and psychiatric reports. Hartman emphasizes the limitations that the writing from these documents creates because her subjects have no voice. Hence, she supplements the official records with what she envisions these young women could have said, might have done, may have thought. In her final musings, Hartman remarks that "muses, drudges, washerwomen, whores, house workers, factory girls, waitresses, and aspiring but never-to-be upstarts make up this company [the chorus], gather in the circle and fall into the line where all particularity and distinction fade

²² Saidiya Hartman. *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*. W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., New York, New York. 2019. Pp. xiv.

away.”²³ She argues that a micro-focused characterization of one girl acts as a representative for all the unknown, undocumented, and generalized women she portrays.

Smith supplements St. Rita’s official record in a similar practical approach to prioritize the “sensory experience” that Hartman emphasizes. Smith complements the historical record where it failed— both to capture victims’ realities and to beget a meaningful emotional response from outsiders. Smith crafts fewer than thirty-five distinct voices in an experiment with the logic of Hartman’s claim that it is inconsequential which victims— or how many— receive particular speculative histories— the few individualized stanzas represent every victim whose voice was lost. It matters not whether one of the St. Rita nursing home victims implored, “God, we need your glitter, you know,/ those wacky miracles/ you do/ for no reason at all,” because this feeling of desperation adds to the “sensory experience” Smith creates.²⁴ The commitment to the emotional spectrum of the event rather than to the historical record creates a tension within the poem in which some voices are incredibly general while others are highly particular. Much as Hartman argues that “one girl can stand for any of them,” Smith’s portrayal of some victims’ interiority suggests other victims’ potential for individuality as well. This approach assumes, though, that “if we as readers have seen one response to the rising floodwaters, we can imagine the others” and that “individuals can stand in for categories of identity... while avoiding the leveling effect of multiplicity.”²⁵ Deflecting the complex task of imagining a nearly infinite range of suffering onto the reader seems irresponsible. Moreover, this uneasiness mirrors the discomfort readers feel about Smith’s speculation on the victim’s thoughts, which is where the power of this kind of poetics emanates from. Hence, “34” is part of a new approach to the

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 345.

²⁴ Smith, *Ibid.*, stanza 24.

²⁵ Mary Ruth Marotte and Glenn Jellenik. *Ibid.*, pp. 110.

documentary poetic genre: it is not confined by the official record, does not see its speculation as detractive from its truth value, and challenges the reader to engage in the same speculation that constitutes the poem.

Within the poem itself, there is a tension between the speculative accounting and the acknowledgement that these folks' histories remain invisible because of their passing. Even though Smith recreates interior lives for these thirty-four victims, and attempts to give them a voice, their narratives are inherently unknowable. Thus, "34" simultaneously espouses two contradictory ideas: its yearning to differentiate and individualize the nursing home residents and its acknowledgement that the victims' specifics remain elusive. The poem is intensely self-aware and weaves this tension into the form and substance of the stanzas themselves. Stannic speaker twenty-five is one of the most powerful demonstrations of this self-aware construction when the speaker remarks that "old folks got shit to say,/ ain't got but a little time to say it."²⁶ The residents face the impossible task of relating a lifetime of knowledge to other folks against their biological clock as it is hastened by the impending storm, a challenge Smith speculates that they were cognizant of in their final moments. This moment in the poem encapsulates the desire to speak even as it acknowledges the limitations of speech and the tragic fact that the nursing home residents did not have enough time to use their voices. Pursuing this idea further, though, raises the question of the limits of knowability, of vocalization and language to relate anything, ranging from the ordinary aspects of being alive to the extraordinary, incomprehensible moments of trauma. Holocaust trauma scholar Dori Laub identifies this as the "struggle to tell," since, for trauma survivors, "there are never enough words or the right words, there is never enough time or the right time, and never enough listening or the right listening to articulate the story that

²⁶ Smith, *Ibid.*, stanza 25.

cannot be fully captured.”²⁷ The attention Smith directs at victims’ undeniable invisibility is not only a limitation of her form but of the historical and documentary record. Ultimately, this stanza embodies one of the central tensions of “34” between speculative individualization and undeniable invisibility which gestures towards the challenges of knowability.

The plurality of voices in “34” further suggests the author’s awareness of the elusiveness of victim narratives. No matter Smith’s methodological approach, she could never corroborate her work with firsthand accounts because she is only interested in the thoughts of those who perished. Even as she creates imaginative histories for some of these victims and describes their past in colorful details, other stanzas remind the reader that her craft is one of general speculation. In this poem, the plurality of voices suggests that the ideas it expresses are not the only potential truths. In one of the last stanzas, Smith writes, “they left us. Me. Him. Our crinkled hands./ They left our hard histories, our gone children and storytellers.”²⁸ Smith lists the possibilities of who has left, broadening those at fault to include the speaker, a collective group, and a vague “Him.” Smith does not limit the poem’s range with the first-person singular. Rather, she expands its scope outward in the subsequent line, remarking on the children who have moved on and the stories that have been forgotten; these details are not specific to any particular person but instead universalize the feeling of loss, abandonment, and invisibility. In this sense, the St. Rita’s residents are rendered “invisible in plain sight,” not unlike the Vietnamese American population of New Orleans East who received minimal media coverage despite their trauma in Katrina.²⁹ Notably, though, the St. Rita’s residents were included in the dominant Katrina narrative, even if it was mostly as a statistic— as in the UPI news excerpt— while those in New

²⁷ Eva Tettenborn. “Teaching Imagined Testimony: Kindred, Unchained Memories, and the African Burial Ground.” *Transformations* XVI.2 (2005): 87. *ProQuest*.

²⁸ Smith, *Ibid.*, stanza 30.

²⁹ *Flood of Images*, pp. 230.

Orleans East were almost entirely excluded from the dominant narrative in the media's uneven coverage of the plight of Katrina victims.³⁰ Despite the differences of visibility in the dominant narrative, the idea of being “invisible in plain sight” is a useful angle for the work initiated by “34”. Smith crafts personified stanzas for some of the nursing home victims but she forces her readers to recognize that there is a distance between what her depictions afford and what remains elusive, better left to generalizations, and entirely inaccessible to an audience.

Smith's practice of speaking on behalf of the dead references the question documentary ethics scholar Joseph Donica poses: “who has a right to victims' narratives?”³¹ Smith answers this question with the similarities in formal style and theme across some stanzas that refuse to let the audience forget that the common link between them is Smith's hand. Specifically, there is a thread of scripture throughout a number of the different stanzas that creates one prayer when read together: “*Our father/ which art in heaven/ hallowed be thy name/ thy will be done.*”³² The italic typeset visually cues their reference to each other, as does the content itself. When read together, these stanzas become a singular, cohesive thought. These phrases are the beginning lines of the Lord's Prayer, a prayer that is arguably a summary of the entire Gospel.³³ For this reason, this is an easily identifiable piece of Scripture that readers likely recognize and piece together as they read “34”.³⁴ The unity built across these four dispersed stanzas reminds readers that the interiority this poem affords is entirely Smith's speculation and bears the marks of her self-conscious artistic craft. She does not pretend that this work is documentary; she embraces its

³⁰ Some scholars like Cook in *Flood of Images* argue that the Vietnamese Americans of New Orleans East were rendered invisible because of the media's insistence on simplifying Katrina's implications into binaries— black/white, rich/poor— and did not have a model within the trauma and suffering of the Vietnamese Americans fit.

³¹ Joseph Donica. “Disaster Ethics of Literature: Voicing Katrina's Stories in a Digital Age.” *Ten Years After Katrina: Critical Perspectives of the Storm's Effect on American Culture and Identity*. Lexington Books, 2015, pp. 12.

³² Smith, *Ibid.*, stanzas 14, 18, 21, 32.

³³ “Lord's Prayer.” Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, January 6, 2020.

³⁴ Though, admittedly only for Christian readers or those versed in Christian scripture. Personally, I Googled the phrase because I am not intimately familiar with this prayer. Despite my lack of Christian context, I recognized the liturgical language of these lines enough to know they could, and should, be read together.

fictionality. These four stanzas contrast with the other thirty stanzas, which are all independent, self-contained representations of distinctive victims; these thirty stanzas are distinct from each other and seem like personal, specific reflections of the nursing home residents. Their plurality is a testament to the diversity of those who perished in the flooding, to the variety of the personal histories undoubtedly contained within the nursing home walls. One speaker “lost [their] seeing in that war” while another yearns for “the man with [their] needles” to take away the inevitable pain and fear death brings.³⁵ A different speaker reflects that “both faith and magic have failed” to save and console them in these final moments.³⁶ The particulars of these stanzas evoke disparate associations with each speaker: one summons the image of a wounded war veteran who has seen far too much, another suggests a difficult history of drug addiction and the sweet pleasure associated with needles, and the third implies a defeated outlook on the world because years of faith and inexplicable magic have failed to prevent this moment of terror. Conversely, the cohesion that the Scripture threads throughout the poem insists that the audience remembers Smith’s role in creating the victims’ thoughts. On a line by line basis, Smith’s audience is aware that this is *her* representation of the victims and not the distanced, documentary work like that of the newspaper excerpt that precedes the poetic stanzas.

Just as “34” explores the tension between different generic conventions, Smith inhabits the space between a reproduction of the dominant narrative’s dehumanization of the dead and the ways in which it can be challenged. Smith’s poetics complicate the subject she attempts to counter, especially in the context of a racialized gaze on the black body. The Louisiana Department of Health reports that in Orleans Parish, which includes St. Rita’s, the mortality rate among blacks was “1.7 to 4 times higher than that among whites for all people 18 years old or

³⁵ Smith, *Ibid.*, stanzas 20, 30.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, stanza 9.

older.”³⁷ With a mortality rate reflective of racial difference, the dehumanization of those who died in the St. Rita nursing home references a history of the black body as spectacle. Smith’s abstraction is not the same as the media’s one-dimensional depiction because she attempts to show the injustice of depictions of racialized victims as a faceless mass, stripped of their humanity. Even though Smith varies the tone and persona across her stanzas, she relegates victims to abstractions by numbering them and not providing her readers with concrete names to which they can assign personalities. The biblical allusion across four stanzas further problematizes this since she does not always afford victims unique interiority. With this in mind, Smith’s aggressive assertion of one victim’s identity, the proclamation “my name [is] Earline,” highlights an absence in the other thirty-three stanzas.³⁸ Smith’s exceptional use of a proper name suggests the possibilities for representations of the dead. In contrast, in the rest of the poem, the absence of concrete identifiers detracts from the reality and humanity each stanza tries to create. Smith does not combat the invisibility draped over all the nursing home victims—though stanza nineteen critiques the generalization of representations, the poem falls into the same tendencies of abstraction. Smith does not afford the nursing home residents a significant amount of individuality and she reproduces this typical dehumanization. The numbered stanzas refuse to let the audience forget how many folks died in St. Rita, but it further dehumanizes victims since this memorial is not invested in remembering the dead’s particular names and stories. Though attributed thought in “34” separates most victims from each other, these people remain abstract concepts because we associate their thoughts with the number floating above each stanza rather than ascribing these snapshots of interiority to someone’s wrinkled, warm

³⁷ Poppy Markwell and Raoult Ratard. “Deaths Directly Caused by Hurricane Katrina.” Louisiana Department of Health, Louisiana.

³⁸ Smith, *Ibid.*, stanza 19.

grandmother named Judith or Maureen. “34” critiques the depiction of the dead in traditional forms even as Smith reproduces some of the tendencies she challenges.

One aspect of Smith’s poetry that I have thus ignored is its soundscape—the auditory experience of hearing this piece performed. My encounter with it is mediated through a YouTube recording of the New York City performance from April 30, 2009. The video is not a professional recording or an official documentation. Rather, an audience member felt they had to memorialize this piece and give the singular incidental moment a future, a place in a larger temporal scope, and allow this performance to live past its natural lifespan. And it does. This video lives on YouTube, and for those with internet access and the knowledge to find this poetic performance, it remains accessible long past its initial performance in New York. This shabbily done, shaky video affords Smith’s interpretation of her poem, her performance of this piece, a lifespan and a temporal scope far beyond that which would have otherwise been ascribed to it. Even further, in an analysis obsessed with who can speak, what speech affords, and what remains elusive, the auditory facet of this poem is a crucial dimension of this argument.



In this performance, “34” is inseparable from Smith herself, which mitigates any potential confusion about the source of the poem’s speculation. Both the limitations of Smith’s personas and the awareness that this is merely one iteration of endless possible performances is apparent in this performance. Smith changes the speed at which she recites the stanzas, along with her tone and volume, to demarcate different personas in each stanza. She links the four italicized stanzas, the allusion to the Lord’s Prayer (*Our father/ which art in heaven/ hallowed be thy name/ thy will be done*) through the booming presence of her voice, her closed-eyes recitation, and her serious tone. This contrasts with other stanzas, such as thirty, where she stutters her words to exemplify hesitation on behalf of the person she embodies. In other stanzas, she recites through a wide smile as she remembers the possible past lives of these folks, who reflect on their youth and feel a sense of comfort, joy, and tranquility in the face of death. Thus, the details and methods through which Smith differentiates the stanzas in her performance inherently reminds the audience that this is merely one example of the range of possibilities for performance, and even further, for the content of the stanzas. The multiplicity of Smith’s performance is a microcosmic example of the iterative potential of this form; the macrocosmic aspect is that Smith’s stanzas are also part of this potential variation. In this sense, Smith’s performance and her range is both a limiting experience and simultaneously marks the nearly endless possibilities for this work.

Another brutal part of Smith’s performance and the auditory experience is its negative: the inescapable weight of silence. The nineteenth stanza is blank on the page, and in the performance, Smith reads out “Nineteen” and then pauses. The silence utterly engulfs the room. Her performance is a rush of booming voices, different cascading inflections and tonal range, and by the nineteenth stanza, there is an expectation of sound since a certain level of volume has

persisted since Smith began performing. The silence that follows the nineteenth stanza is brutal—it is vacuous and arresting in precisely the opposite way that the volume of Smith’s recitation is previously deafening. This silence marks that which cannot be known, reminds the audience that the folks in the nursing home were silenced, that this is a speculation of their final thoughts. Even further, though, this recitation reminds the audience that in the absence of speculation, there is only deafening, heavy silence. This silence, this absence, in the middle of Smith’s performance addresses the silence that has overwhelmed this story, these kinds of Katrina stories, that inform all stories of loss and grief and abandonment. Since it confronts the audience in the middle of her performance, the silence is impossible to ignore— one immediately thinks about the violence of silence, of neglect, of abandonment, of willful ignorance and institutional erasure. But this silence demands attention from the audience because Smith recites stanzas both before and after it, and to ignore the silence would ignore a crucial part of the speculation Smith crafts.

Ultimately, the formal features— the interplay between the prose and poetry Smith constructs— suggests that the imagined version of experience is not an inherently less valid representation in comparison with firsthand documentarian work. Even further, Smith acutely reminds her audience that she is the creator of this representation through the commonalities between the thirty-four stanzas which further complicates her assertion of its validity and ability to speak on behalf of the dead. While Smith’s poem engages in questions about which forms provide audiences with the best representation of suffering on behalf of those who cannot speak to their experience, she does not entirely exist outside of the dehumanizing gaze of traditional representations of the dead. Yet Smith’s engagement with fiction as a way to generate some kind of truth and her rejection of the inherent truth value attributed to documentary work is significant

for a discourse wherein many voices remain elusive and utterly unknowable. She engages in forms of appropriation and marginalization which are, on some level, the very aspects of Katrina discourse and media representation that she attempts to counter. Yet her appropriation does meaningful work that aims to represent suffering for those who are traditionally marginalized. Her poetry, with its own complications of voice and speech, is a powerful example of the significant, truth-aspirational work that imaginative literature can accomplish in lieu of, or in conjunction with, traditional forms of documentary work.

Vulnerability of Memory and Spaces

This is the hardest part to write. This chapter has confounded me, escaped my linguistic repertoire, stymied my ability to put words on paper, and utterly catalyzed my belief that language is inherently fallible and can only bring people so close to understanding. There is always that which language cannot encapsulate. In short, my difficulties in writing this chapter are a microcosm of the inability of language, of art, of any representational practice to represent fully and completely—the underlying question that my project centers around. Accordingly, I write around the main issue that initially caught my attention which is at the center of Ratliff's installation. There is an almost relentless stream of questions, arguments, matters of analysis that must be addressed about *Things That Float*: issues surrounding permanence and impermanence, memory-making spaces, visibility expectations, modes of witnessing, talismans, and memories. I lose myself in these analyses and therefore find myself taking far too many pages to get to the core of the questions this installation raises. Thus, I am marking for you, my patient reader, that once you plow through the more immediate analysis, there is an ultimate payoff. Eventually, I come to the problems of memory and the spaces in which memories are created, and the injury to memory, history, communities, and memorializations that inevitably follows when the physical sites of memory are lost. This is an argument that takes time to set up, and a significant amount of preemptive work is needed to address this core question. I thank you for your patience. In this chapter, I confront the necessity of writing around trauma rather than into it. Hence, I echo the challenge that artists like Ratliff take on as they envision ways to make trauma more accessible for their audiences—and ways to open up, or make possible, viewers' engagement.

Rontherin Ratliff is a visual artist who lives and works in New Orleans, where he was born. His work primarily takes the form of sculpture and textual assemblages as commentaries

on contemporary social issues. His interests lie in the relationship between architecture and the human experience; his work frequently examines the impact of the natural world's destructive tendencies on manmade structures and spaces. In 2012, Ratliff exhibited an installation art piece titled *Things That Float*. In his artist statement on his website, Ratliff partially justifies his interest in this subject by describing his Katrina experience. In this statement, he details the materials he used for this project, including “discarded building materials, dismantled furniture, and salvaged family photographs” that he found in the aftermath of the storm.³⁹ Ratliff did not evacuate New Orleans. Despite having the necessary time and mobility, he remained in the city and ventured to the Ninth Ward to determine the fate of his grandmother's house and of his own. The artist describes his shock at the range of items that floated in the murky flood water: “houses had become prisoners to gravity, as they had filled up with water. Inside, large heavy pieces of furniture floated about freely while seemingly weightless photographs lay buried below the surface.”⁴⁰ Inspired by this experience, Ratliff created *Things That Float* to memorialize feelings of loss in and of his community.

³⁹ Ratliff Rontherin. “THINGS THAT FLOAT: 2012.” thingsthatfloat. Majestic Lines LLC.

⁴⁰ Ibid.



Ratliff forges the pieces of debris from Katrina and discarded items from the flooding to

create three distinct homes that seem to float above a canoe filled with water bottles that rests on the gallery's floor. The three houses hang from the ceiling at different angles, suspended by steel cable. The top halves of the homes are slated wooden thatches that conceal the houses' interior. The bottom half of each structure is transparent plexiglass, but that material has become murky, almost fogged where it meets the wooden panels, an effect created by Ratliff. Shredded photographs are suspended inside the houses and litter the homes' floors. The combination of the angles at which the houses hang, the murkiness of the meeting point between the wood and plexiglass, and the suspended photographs create the impression that the bottom portions of the homes are filled with water in which these photographs float. Even further, the angled suspension of the homes from the ceiling, in conjunction with the suggestion of water within the structures, implies the presence of floodwater outside the houses in which they appear to bob.

Although Ratliff explains that his installation was inspired by his shock at what became weightless in the Ninth Ward flooding and what became entombed in the toxic water, it is also crucially informed by and responsive to the media portrayal of the affected communities and Katrina survivors. At large, the media perpetuated two narrative arcs for Hurricane Katrina. One of these storylines, famously summarized by Kanye West on an NBC broadcast fundraiser, is that the government neglected its citizens, leaving them at the mercy of the hurricane and the floodwaters. West exclaimed that "George Bush [then-President] doesn't care about Black people" in his understanding of the government's slow response.⁴¹ The other storyline "argued that New Orleans residents had gone crazy— especially African Americans, who had descended into chaos and banditry."⁴² As further argued by scholars like Kathleen Tierney, the initial media

⁴¹ "A Concert for Hurricane Relief." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, December 12, 2019.

⁴² Bernie Cook. "We Were Not on the Map: A Village Called Versailles." *Flood of Images Media, Memory, and Hurricane Katrina*, 10 Jan. 2015, pp. 283.

coverage of the physical devastation of the landscape and structures along the Gulf Coast was quickly abandoned for stories that “characterized disaster victims as opportunistic looters and violent criminals.”⁴³ People ranging from public figures like Kanye West to academic scholars focused on the racial composition of Katrina victims as the genesis of their criticism. Put simply by West, and further contextualized by scholars, part of the dominant Katrina narrative recognizes the implications of race in the way victims were portrayed by the media.

Eventually, depictions that demonized Katrina victims and metaphors that linked New Orleans to various exotic spheres dominated the mass media’s explanation of this disaster. The situation in New Orleans was described as a war zone, which compared the conditions in New Orleans to the invasion and occupation of Iraq.⁴⁴ This comparison monopolized the media’s description of the city, which became emblematic for the entire Gulf Coast. Activists created “bumper stickers and memes that purported to show George W. Bush which Gulf was Persian and which was American...to expose a scratched-out spot on the map where a broken— or perhaps fixed— system had failed to either prevent or ameliorate the disaster.”⁴⁵ Further, the media’s language perpetuated the exoticization of Katrina victims. News outlets characterized Katrina survivors as refugees, which stripped them of their rights as citizens and displaced their suffering onto an exotic sphere outside the United States where blame was as murky as responsibility.⁴⁶ Through this language, relief aid was not framed as the responsibility of a government to its citizens in need, but closer to that of charity for suffering it had no role in preventing or direct responsibility in mitigating. The images and descriptions news outlets

⁴³ Kathleen Tierney, Christine Bevc, Erica Kuligowski. “Metaphors Matter: Disaster Myths, Media Frames, and Their Consequences in Hurricane Katrina.” *Sage Journals*, 2006, pp. 60-1.

⁴⁴ Jennie Lightweis-Goff. “Peculiar and Characteristic: New Orleans Exceptionalism from Olmsted to the Deluge.” *American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism, and Bibliography*, vol. 86, no. 1. Pp. 60-1.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 148.

⁴⁶ Leigh Gilmore. “Refugee-Citizen: Mediating Testimony through Image and Word in the Wake of Hurricane Katrina.” *A/B Auto/Biography Studies*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2017, pp. 673-681.

circulated codified Katrina's visual and linguistic repertoire. Central to the visual landscape that media outlets created were "grotesque images of bloated corpses floating in the rotting waters that flooded the streets of New Orleans."⁴⁷ These images, however inadvertent, reanimate a violent history of the spectral white gaze on the black body as a form of amusement, exoticization, and fetishization; black suffering is not seen as something which demands or elicits empathy, but rather as a matter of passing interest at best and entertaining at worst. The interplay between different media representations of the suffering and trauma that Katrina engendered is the backdrop against which Ratliff constructed his installation. While he does not explicitly reference the problem of spectatorship as a form of violence or injury, it undoubtedly influences his work and, at the very least, comprises a long history of sentiments and practices of representation to which his piece responds.

Tellingly, the dominant media narrative, though not inaccurate, is not the same story that survivors tried to share in the wake of the storm, a tension Ratliff explores in his work. Put simply, they were robbed of agency to curate their own story. As Joseph Donica explains, "the survivors most affected by the disaster had the quietest voice in telling their own stories... those primarily responsible for telling Katrina's stories were former Gulf residents or those with a tourist's fascination with a culture they know little about."⁴⁸ Katrina survivors know that their story is misrepresented; they are arrested in the image of scarred, battered, and scattered victims despite forward-looking collective efforts within their communities to heal. In an interview about his photographic work *Still Here: Stories After Katrina*, the artist Joseph Rodriguez explains that "individuals within the black community most affected by the tragedy would 'often tell [him]

⁴⁷ Henry A Giroux. "Reading Hurricane Katrina: Race, Class, and the Biopolitics of Disposability." *College Literature* 33.3, 2006, pp. 173.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 3.

that people really don't care...what they [survivors] are saying or who they are'.⁴⁹ In *Things That Float*, the scrapped photographs resist the infuriating trend that Rodriguez identifies: the imposition of a certain narrative onto survivors. Ratliff's viewers cannot place the subjects of the photographs he includes within the homes' plexiglass bottom because these images are ruined from water damage and shredding. In their altered state, the photographs do not allow viewers to reduce them to something that neatly aligns with Katrina iconography or with generic family photographs. Instead, they remind viewers of our limited ability to understand this trauma because of the forms and the effects of its mediation. In a discussion about agency and the lack thereof for survivors, it is necessary to address the inherent agency associated with making a photograph: the photographer arranges the subject of the image, chooses the time to take the photo, decides what belongs in the frame, and styles the image. It is significant, then, that Ratliff uses photographs as the signifiers in the bottom of these homes because of the contrast with who has power over this narrative and how this agency manifests.

One of the most interesting tensions that this installation references is the relative permanence of the dominant media record, something that the hurricane robbed houses and other structures of. Presently, I will discuss the permanence afforded to the media, something that is usually more fluid and changing as stories develop. I have noted above the media's circulation of misinformation; more critical for an understanding of Ratliff's work is the urgency its portrayal of injury causes and the harm it enacts, as these events are historicized and become entombed in public memory. Scholars Gordon Coon and John Huxford, theorizing the cultural afterlives of broadcast news and how images relate to the cultural collective during highly mediated moments of trauma, argue that "news does not describe the world but 'portrays an arena of

⁴⁹ Celeste-Marie Bernier. "You Can't Photograph Everything": The Acts and Arts of Bearing Witness in Joseph Rodriguez's *Still Here: Stories after Katrina* (2008)." *Journal of American Studies* 44, no. 3 (2010), pp. 537.

dramatic forces and action' in which a reader joins 'as an observer at a play'." In this way, news images are transformed from texts that demand interpretation into scripts, predetermined blueprints for the kinds of suffering that an audience is conditioned to see and knows how to respond to.⁵⁰ Simply, news outlets prime audiences for certain narratives which create the register through which audiences consume normative news broadcasts. The media's depictions and framing of events directly inform the responses of varied audiences, and in the case of Hurricane Katrina, the media's portrayal of the disaster informed the response from governmental institutions. In particular, "Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco issued an order allowing soldiers to shoot to kill looters in an effort to restore calm," a calm that was perceived as endangered because of the media's emphatic focus on alleged crime, looting, and murder in New Orleans, primarily perpetrated by the city's black and brown residents.⁵¹ News headlines and descriptions, such as the one below, exemplify the vocabulary used to report on Katrina that eventually became part of its cultural memory. Despite mass media's circulation of misinformation about the violence and lawlessness in New Orleans, it was later revealed that almost none of these crimes actually happened. Yet the state's violence against marked citizens as a result of the media's language, visual imagery, and incessant demonization of survivors resulted in deadly policy, such as the deployment of the U.S. military on domestic soil.

NEW ORLEANS, Louisiana (CNN) -- A fearful Friday has arrived in lawless New Orleans, with police snipers stationed on the roof of their precinct, trying to protect it from the armed thugs roaming seemingly at will through the flood-ravaged city.

The subheading of CNN's article entitled "Military due to move into New Orleans" on September 2, 2005.

⁵⁰ Gordon Coon and John Huxford. "News Images as Lived Images: Media Ritual, Cultural Performance, and Public Trauma." *Critical Studies in Media Communications* 26, 2009, pp. 459, 465.

⁵¹ Giroux, *Ibid.*, pp. 176.

Even further, the visual and linguistic repertoire established by news outlets about Katrina became codified in the public memory as one unique instance of trauma. In effect, this event was distanced from the history of violence against the black body. It is an incredibly difficult task to historicize the present moment. Failed communications and collapsed infrastructure that characterized the aftermath of Katrina made crowdsourcing information nearly impossible. Though not without their own limitations, news outlets became the source of raw materials in the search of a cohesive, easily digestible narrative. Crafting an accurate and more attuned history of the dire Katrina situation, though, necessitates a reckoning with the underlying sociopolitical inequalities that the hurricane exacerbated. This requires a reconciliation with the history of black folks in this country, a space where many were kidnapped, brutalized, dehumanized, systemically marginalized, begrudgingly and partially incorporated. With a wider temporal lens, Hurricane Katrina transforms from a unique moment of trauma— part natural and part societal— into one instance of violent white spectatorship nestled within a history of racial negligence and violence pre-dating the existence of the United States. The esteemed scholar Henry Giroux articulates that the “bodies of the poor, black, brown, elderly, and sick came to signify what the battered body of Emmett Till once unavoidably revealed...the Hurricane Katrina disaster, like the Emmett Till affair, revealed a vulnerable and destitute segment of the nation’s citizenry that conservatives not only refused to see but had spent the better part of two decades demonizing.”⁵² In other words, just as the mutilated body of Emmett Till forced America to see the repercussions of the racial tensions that white institutions had spent years cultivating, Hurricane Katrina forced a similar reckoning in the way it brought intersectional

⁵² Ibid., pp. 173-4.

identity politic issues including class, race, and gender onto the center stage of a cultural conversation.

One aspect of the dominant narrative that adequately reflects the experiences of Katrina victims, and something Ratliff subtly references, is the poverty of most victims. As Glenn Jellenik eloquently explains, the dominant narrative about Katrina spread so quickly that it became problematically reductive as it was entrenched in the cultural memory. He explains the danger of this widespread shorthand where Katrina was reduced to a culmination of “poverty, racism, and government ineptitude.”⁵³ The circulation and reproduction of the dominant Katrina narrative narrowed the focus of dialogue and simplified the diversity of victims’ experiences to fit into a familiar mold: charitable response, empty empathy, reinforcement of cultural narratives about communities of color and the social need to provide for and manage them. Despite the damage of this cultural shorthand, there are whispers of truth in it, truth that Ratliff expresses in *Things That Float*. The suspended, wooden thatched houses gesture towards a major, indisputable aspect of Katrina discourse: poverty. While the focus of this art installation is not the impact of poverty on what was lost to the flooding, the construction of these homes references shotgun houses with their thatched wooden siding, narrow fronts, and lack of windows. Shotgun houses typically extend backwards to create very long, narrow houses through which there is one clear path from the front to back door. Shotgun houses were and continue to be a common structure in poorer neighborhoods of New Orleans, supposedly due to a tax code basing property tax on frontage and not square footage, though no record of this specific code can be found.⁵⁴ They also reference the West African word “shogon” which translates to

⁵³ Mary Ruth Marotte and Glenn Jellenik. *Ten Years After Katrina: Critical Perspectives of the Storm’s Effect on American Culture and Identity*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015, pp. 224.

⁵⁴Cangelosi, Robert J. “Did a Property Tax on Street Frontage Bring about the ‘Shotgun’ House? New Orleans Truths vs. Tales.” Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans, June 30, 2018.

“God’s House” and further cements this architectural style in African and African American histories.⁵⁵ Ratliff’s representation of shotgun houses gestures towards the lower socioeconomic status of those who call these structures home, as well as their knowledge of and engagement with African and African American history. Though not explicit, Ratliff’s work references the very real poverty of most Katrina victims that the dominant narrative also identifies.

One of the most striking aspects of *Things That Float* is the radical defamiliarization it creates for the way we discuss and remember the storm. By the estimation of Holocaust trauma scholar Michael Rothberg, the limits of representation, “estrangement, and [the] implication of language, terror, and trauma” are one in the same in Blanchot’s writings on his Auschwitz experience.⁵⁶ While Ratliff’s representation of Katrina is notably different in subject matter, scale of trauma, and form of representation, he expertly uses estrangement and defamiliarization in his commentary on Katrina’s impact. This art refuses to confine itself to reductive ideas that forge the dominant narrative. Rather, Ratliff’s memorialization of the loss he and his community experienced is centered around ruined memories, destroyed spaces of memory-making, and shared communal mourning for these structures. In a bold move, Ratliff does not depict the hurricane itself, the destructive floodwater, the death toll, or other features of this disaster that became emblematic of Katrina for the rest of the country. Rather, he focuses on the physical structures, the homes, and the small items that were lost in the floodwaters. Ratliff’s radical representation of Katrina’s impact demands thoughtful consideration about the implications of depicting suffering and loss. His resistance to creating a piece that merely reproduces the typical narrative is emphasized by his depiction of what the loss of spaces and items means for families and communities. Ratliff’s work questions how we remember and memorialize this disaster by

⁵⁵ Shotgun Houses. Accessed February 15, 2018. <http://www.datacenterresearch.org/pre-katrina/tertiary/shotgun.html>.

⁵⁶ Rothberg, *Ibid.*, pp. 60.

creating an “anti-spectacular event which focuses on the damage left by Hurricane Katrina *after* the television crews disappeared” in the gallery.⁵⁷ As a direct contrast to the way television crews represented Katrina’s destruction and the death toll in New Orleans, Ratliff focuses on what its destruction means for small-scale, every day activities rather than the overarching catastrophe it was for the city of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast at large. *Things That Float* emphasizes the trauma that each particular family— with their own memories and associations of their spaces— experienced upon the discovery that the grounding force in their lives, the safe space of their home or their parent’s home, was irrevocably lost or changed.

In contrast to the media’s codified portrayal of Hurricane Katrina, that which assumes a kind of permanence was robbed of this status in the aftermath of Katrina’s destruction. Most visibly apparent was the vulnerability of houses, community structures, and infrastructural landmarks that are habitually afforded endurance and longevity. *Things That Float* demonstrates this vulnerability quite powerfully. The three structures that hang from the gallery ceiling are ruins, mementos of the destruction that flooded Gulf Coast communities, and a reminder of what was left behind in the storm’s wake. Their rooftops, all different colors, are faded, chipped, and apparently unfinished— one is a pale shade of blue that looks as if it aged in the sun for years and had been abandoned. Each house has a coat hook on its side, though no coat hangs from it. No human presence appears in this installation, no comforting jacket left on the hook as someone returns home, no hat on a post to signify life within. The violence of the storm entirely ruptured social worlds, at their core the familial house, and with the impermanence of physical structures, one must ask the question of what happens to these social worlds. Are they too abandoned? Poet and scholar Natasha Trethewey cautions “about the dangers of rebuilding not only the physical

⁵⁷ Marotte, *Ibid.*, pp. 203.

landscape but also the memorial landscape because the two are inextricably tied— how we remember the land and its history influences how we rebuild.”⁵⁸ Simply, Trethewey posits that the physical structures of the landscape and community inform the memories made and recalled; the vulnerability of structures typically seen as permanent or semi-permanent massively ruptures personal and collective memory. Suspended from the ceiling by wire, Ratliff’s houses allude to marionettes, objects that are easily manipulated and quickly abandoned by children grown bored of them. Grounded in neither the literal sense or the figurative sense, these homes are suspended, easily discarded, and highly vulnerable structures that belie our expectations of stability and permanence.

For Katrina victims, the materials Ratliff used to create these structures cause a twice-over sensation of dispossession. More obviously is the physical dispossession, since the loss of homes, the destruction of community spaces, and the complete alteration of the physical landscape of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast fascinated television news media. This dispossession ranges from the temporary alienation caused by a place that no longer looks like home to the jarring, totalizing loss of never being able to return to home spaces. Scholar Eloisa Valenzuela-Mendoza discusses the more extreme yet not uncommon of these dispossessions: “the displaced are those who cannot afford to return to the Coast, or those who were living in trailers, dispossessed of their homes within a system that is not geared to adequately assist the citizens most in need,” critiquing the lack of aid available to the most vulnerable survivors and the lingering implications of this neglect.⁵⁹ The impact of this dispossession, of those who will likely never recover their pre-Katrina lives and homes, suggests the intense unknowability of the

⁵⁸ Simon Dickel and Evagelia Kindinger. *After the Storm: The Cultural Politics of Hurricane Katrina*. Transcript Verlag, EBSCOhost, 2015, pp. 123.

⁵⁹ Marotte, *Ibid.*, pp. 82.

entire scope of the dispossession and trauma that Katrina caused. There is no way to fully understand, to comprehend the nuanced, highly personal, and different losses and relocations and dislocations that Katrina caused especially since these losses continue to unfold today.

This ongoingness informs the second form of dispossession for survivors viewing *Things That Float* in that they cannot know whether or not the material scraps from their ruined homes have become part of the installation. Ratliff used discarded building materials and pieces of scrap wood from Katrina's destruction—the homes, community spaces, and businesses that some victims have yet to rebuild or never plan on rebuilding. Survivors cannot identify whether their ruins are physically part of this exhibit. This further dispossession, in other words, generates from Ratliff's recycling these ruinous materials as art, which aligns with Diedre Barret's idea of quiet trauma. While Hurricane Katrina is a major trauma, with the associations of a traumatic event like the Holocaust, contained within this massive event are infinite quiet traumas, or "family traumas"—that is traumas of "loss, abandonment, rejection, betrayal."⁶⁰ At the level of personal and intimate relations and everyday experiences, innumerable quiet traumas manifest in the second dispossession that Ratliff's installation produces. While Ratliff's installation clearly engages the large-scale trauma of Katrina, his work seems more invested in the implications of the small-scale traumas on how we remember this disaster and represent its trauma.

The construction of the houses that comprise *Things That Float* suggests the limits of traumatic representations and the power of what remains incomprehensible. The tops of the homes are thatched wood, entirely impenetrable by the viewer's eyes. The visual and spatial inaccessibility is further emphasized by the unused and unusable fixtures: door knockers, handles, and coat hooks. There is no door through which a person could answer a knock—no

⁶⁰ Ann E Kaplan. *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*. Rutgers University Press, 2005, pp. 19.

attempted entry could be completed and the interior of the house could never be penetrated or made visible. Potential interaction—the urge to enter, to observe, to know—fails because the structure is no longer a residence; it has instead become a floating prison of ruined memories and destroyed spaces. Part of Ratliff’s experience voyaging through the floodwater to his and his grandmother’s houses resists representation and he artistically renders this inaccessibility through the impenetrable structures he creates. Michael Rothberg posits that “as much as...the ‘writing of disaster’ help us to grasp the limits of representation and the simultaneous estrangement and implication of language, terror, and trauma... [it] also presents its own challenges to that understanding.”⁶¹ While Ratliff visualizes the obvious loss and communal destruction that Katrina caused, he also suggests the impossibility of relating the full effects of this to those who did not experience it. To this end, the top halves of the houses do not give the audience a complete view of the internal destruction. The wooden slats suggest that there is an intense unknowability that no representation can bridge. Part of the difficulty of talking about traumatic events is that, as Tettenborn notes, “traumatic historical events remain elusive and inaccessible”; there are never the right words or modes of expression to adequately and entirely relate an occurrence that utterly shatters one’s world.⁶²

Representations of trauma inherently and indisputably fail in their task of relating an experience because there remains an aspect of inaccessibility. *Things That Float* addresses this distance between survivors and spectators in its form, reminding viewers from beyond the community that they will never fully understand or embody survivors’ trauma. *Things That Float* lives in the ambiguous space between what the trauma scholar Ann Kaplan calls “the

⁶¹ Rothberg, *Ibid.*, pp. 60.

⁶² Tettenborn, *Ibid.*, pp. 63

nonrepresentability of trauma and... the search to figure its pain.”⁶³ In a recognition of that which cannot be represented, Ratliff denies viewers the illusory belief in their conceptualization of the entire scope of Katrina trauma. Ratliff refuses to pull back the curtain on physical or affective intents, or to offer the nuances and complications of this pain for an audience removed from the experience. The visual representation of that which is inaccessible is significant; without it, we would have no images of the destruction, and no opportunity to confront the limits of any such representation. Thus, Ratliff’s self-conscious construction of the houses embodies the idea that there is value in and a need to demonstrate that which cannot be represented. Just as Bernier explains in terms of photography, “a recognition of that which cannot be photographed remains integral to the process of empowering the otherwise appropriated or silenced stories of the dispossessed.”⁶⁴ The necessity of recognizing and of showing others the limitations of one’s representation of trauma is a crucial part of the aesthetics of disaster art. In Ratliff’s work, the closed-off top of the suspended homes reminds viewers that this is a highly mediated recreation of the structures Katrina destroyed— it forces viewers to confront the fact that there will always be aspects of this suffering that remain elusive to those who did not endure it, despite the rarity and ubiquity of Katrina representations and the responses they generate.

Closely related to the problem of visibility is that of knowability. The plexiglass portion of these structures confounds viewers’ expectations about museums and visibility. *Things That Float* was exhibited in the gallery DiverseWorks in Houston, surrounded by display cases of other artwork. These pieces were encased in glass to best display their artistry from multiple perspectives. In stark contrast to the works surrounding it, the plexiglass enclosure of *Things That Float* does not make it easier to view its photographs; they are almost entirely obscured by

⁶³ Kaplan, *Ibid.*, pp. 65.

⁶⁴ Bernier, *Ibid.*, pp. 551.

water damage and their arrangement within the piece. Viewers expect that pieces will be easily consumed in display cases, but Ratliff resists this with the destruction of the photographs inside the houses. This refusal to adhere to the conventions of the viewing experience in museums suggests a discomfort about providing the illusion to viewers that they have seen the entirety of suffering. In particular, Ratliff challenges our reliance on photographs as sources of immediate truth. The famous essayist Susan Sontag notes “the camera’s rendering of reality must always hide more than it discloses” because of the photographer’s construction of the image, the photograph’s inability to relate socio-political context, and its necessary exclusion of the world outside of the frame.⁶⁵ Ratliff forestalls viewers’ expectations about the role photography, especially family photographs, plays in any mediation on Katrina and loss; he does not use photographs to capture reality as viewers expect.

Even further, the display cases’ bottoms suggest the installation’s awareness of its performance. In the privacy of the home, photographs are not displayed in plexiglass cases for a distanced viewing experience. Rather, they are carefully pasted into scrapbooks that grandmothers pull off the bookshelf to instruct visiting grandkids of their lineage; photographs adorn the walls, sit atop coffee tables, and occupy bedroom sideboards. As the objects that pass stories from one generation to the next, they represent significant moments or people whose images prompt stories of familial heritage, particular instances of triumph, defeat, and everything in between. Ratliff denies this cozy, familial viewing experience— or even the possibility of it— to his audience because of the indeterminate subjects of the photographs. His use of the plexiglass demonstrates his awareness of the associations viewers have with this medium and exhibition style, and his insistence that Katrina ruptured this habit and the plausibility of our

⁶⁵ Susan Sontag. *On Photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1977, pp. 4, 18.

assumptions of what is visible and the form it bears. Katrina illuminates what was not visible in contrast to our expectations of what an audience should be able to see, which is the same tension that the photographs in the plexiglass work towards.

The materiality of photographs is a central concern for Ratliff's installation— the effects of using shredded photographs in the bottom of the suspended homes reference the implications for *Things That Float* at large. The expectations viewers have of photographs, as well as what photographs signify, are crucial to my analysis and informed by Sontag's text *On Photography*. In her estimation, the "photograph is both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence" because these objects reference a past that is no longer.⁶⁶ This formulation is of particular interest to me because of the questions about what happens when photographs themselves become indiscernible. As other photographic scholars argue, photographs are haunting in their signification of a past that is inaccessible. But what happens when the photograph also becomes inaccessible? This is a question raised by Ratliff's installation because of the way he shredded the salvaged photographs for *Things That Float*. This is further complicated by the idea that photographs resurrect and reanimate spaces and people that are no longer present or recoverable. Photographs allow viewers to see what has been lost, what once was, and what cannot be anymore; they allow viewers to place themselves in this past, in a particular moment that ended the moment after the camera captured it. To use Sontag's words, "all photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability."⁶⁷ This holds true when viewers can see what the photograph captured and reflects. *Things That Float* does not engage in this kind of photographic work, though it is predicated on these assumptions that viewers have. Ratliff uses shredded photographs, images

⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 16.

⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 11.

that cannot be read as mementos of the past because the past they signified is indiscernible.

There is a tension between what photographs are supposed to make available, the promise felt by using this medium, and the sense that it is curtailed, that this promise is broken, that the viewer is wounded by the intense unavailability of the photographs and their refusal to allow viewers to place themselves in the captured past.

Ratliff uses the conventions of reading photographs against the viewer and as a result, replicates the eeriness survivors experienced in spaces destroyed by the storm. Ratliff complicates the expectation that photographs assert the indisputable there-ness of the subject. As viewers, we expect that photographs make accessible a past as they resurrect that which is now gone. Photographs are haunting in their certification of what once was and their emphasis on the absence that the past inherently creates for the present.⁶⁸ Yet Ratliff's photographs perform only the absence half of this equation. The pseudo-presence that the photographs once offered has vanished because of their water damage and shredded form. These images become tokens of absence, not only of the past they captured, but also of the photograph itself because of its vulnerable materiality. As a result, they become a new generation of signifiers, encapsulating all that was lost in the floodwater. Viewers are haunted by their inability to read these photographs because they come to signify the material damage of the hurricane and the damage to memories of and in the affected communities. Through the absence of subjects in the shredded photographs, Ratliff denies his audience a gruesome kind of tourism, a desire to resurrect both physical spaces and personal connections which existed before Katrina. This strategy mirrors the construction of the hanging homes in the way that Ratliff tantalizes his audience about what they

⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. 16.

have access to see, what they are on the cusp of viewing, and what remains hidden or unknowable despite its haunting absence.

Even further, the displays of only shredded photographs in the base of the houses powerfully injects these items with the significance of all vulnerable memories and talismans that Katrina wiped out of personal and familial memoryscapes. In the same vein as Katrina scholars like Dickel who argue that “Katrina’s impact calls for us to rethink how we define ‘place’ [and] suggest[s] that the concept of place is tied not only to concepts of identity, memory, and history, but also to physical spaces that must be continually preserved and restored,” Ratliff challenges the persistence of memory and history for communities whose physical spaces were utterly destroyed.⁶⁹ These shredded photographs reference all the talismans of memory that Katrina destroyed. While these sites of memory originally indicated a past pre-Katrina, in their post-Katrina ruin, their signification doubles: these objects, represented in *Things That Float* by photographs, signify both the past originally contained in these talismans, and the memories associated with Katrina and its aftermath. The waterlogged photographs floating and sinking within the three homes are a horrible reminder of the way in which the water unforgivingly decimated sites of memory and safety, and the enduring loss that ensues. The photographs reference the intensely personal loss that Ratliff and innumerable others experience from the flooding. His insistence on waterlogged photographs, as opposed to a plurality of other items, suggests his interest not in a catalogue of what Katrina destroyed, but in how the loss of particular pieces of memory, represented by photographs, is an irreparable one, a theft unparalleled and unreported. Personal photographs are of no monetary value and cannot be

⁶⁹ Dickel and Kindinger *After the Storm*, Ibid., pp. 114.

restaged; it is possible that many of their locations are no longer physically intact. In this way, the photographs represent past physical spaces and the talismans that Katrina stole.

The vulnerability of these structures, of homes habitually seen as immovable, static objects and spaces, are perhaps best understood through Kaplan's idea of quiet trauma. She explains that there is a kind of quiet trauma, or in her words, "family trauma, that is traumas of loss, abandonment, rejection, betrayal" that results from incidents of small-scale injury in contrast to the massive, disruptive traumas like the Holocaust. Generally, Hurricane Katrina is framed as a trauma comparable to other instances of widespread suffering like 9/11. The experience in which *Things That Float* is most deeply invested is the small-scale, personal losses and their implications. The loss of the familial home, the site where children's growth was ticked on the doorframe, where the family's goldfish was buried in the backyard under the scraggly bush, where good news was excitedly shared and warmed the room, where it felt safe to share the bad news: the quiet trauma that can never be fully encapsulated by an art installation or understood in societal discussions about Hurricane Katrina. The three houses that hang from the gallery ceiling are not comfortable, inhabited spaces that evoke memories of warm family events or safe refuge from the external world. They are basic, stock architectural figures without any of the emotional weight that we imagine a home should have. This is the key difference, the difference that cannot be explained because of its particulars to each person, family, group, who lost the space that embodied this energy. This is the small-scale, quiet trauma that cannot be generalized or abstracted. No representation can deliver the same blow, navigate the particulars of this feeling of loss, of both the physical space of one's home and of the memories contained in it.

The quiet traumas that Ratliff emphasizes in *Things That Float* are further significant because totalizing trauma culminates from these innumerable quiet traumas. The individual suffering, the layering and ceaseless pain of familial losses and ruptures, informs the way the massive moment of trauma is framed in a broader cultural discussion. Ratliff explains in his artist statement that he was intensely interested in which items floated in the flood water and which became entombed, trapped, weighted down by gravity. His interest in this difference, and what difference it makes, is evident in *Things That Float*: in the way the houses are suggestively bobbing in floodwater despite their size and supposed weight, and in the way the nearly weightless photographs within the plexiglass are scattered on the floor, mostly unable to float (though some do, and are suspended within the plexiglass bottom). This contrast speaks to the relationship between history and memory on monumental and quiet trauma. The hurricane is undoubtedly traumatic in its rupturing of the social world. However, the quiet traumas that Katrina engendered are also enduring forms of trauma, the pain of small experiences like walking down the road and noticing the absence of one particular tree, uprooted in the storm, or remembering that your neighbor could not return after the flooding.

The two kinds of material objects Ratliff combines, the houses and the photographs, reference distinct traumas and the way Katrina memories function. The houses, the larger structures that floated in the floodwater, are the more persistently visible part of Katrina's impact and the memories we associate with it. The large-scale destruction of Katrina, the ruins of homes and schools and flooded highways, is prominent in collective memories— images and narratives of the New Orleans Superdome, housing lots reduced to their concrete foundations, and houses floating in the floodwater are iconic reference points. And just as the photographs within Ratliff's houses sink and are only partially suspended in the plexiglass, the small-scale traumas

associated with Katrina remain peripheral in the historical memory of Katrina. Some aspects of trauma are not palatable. People do not want to hear about intensely personal and horrific experiences; they prefer to recount Katrina in broad strokes. Or if there is an audience for personal recollections of trauma, it is comprised of voyeuristic spectatorship.⁷⁰ On the one hand, Ratliff refuses to let only that which floats, the literal structures and also the most prominent Katrina memories, marginalize the other aspects of Katrina trauma. However, his inclusion of photographs, the object referential to that which sinks, both physically and in terms of the exclusion of small-scale trauma from the dominant Katrina memory, does not entirely bridge this divide because Ratliff uses photographs that are indiscernible. He draws attention to this tension between what sinks and what floats physically, and what that means for the memory and history we curate for Katrina in our culture. Through the use of ruined photographs, he gestures towards manifestations of quiet trauma and how it inherently informs and limits the broader discussions of monumental traumas.

As I alluded to above, the media conceptualized the events in the Gulf Coast in the wake of Katrina as nearly anything except a natural disaster compounded by governmental ineptitude. In addition to other comparisons, New Orleans was likened to Vietnam. The media conflated Hurricane Katrina with the Vietnam War, because of the refugees, the trauma, and other slight similarities, but the issues of historicizing a moment where one version of events does not exist is a far more fruitful comparison. University of Michigan faculty and scholar Kristin Haas discusses the difficulties of memorials in terms of the Vietnam War Memorial. In Haas' estimation, the memorialization of trauma should "commemorate the difficulty of making

⁷⁰ Celeste-Marie Bernier, *Ibid.*, pp. 544.

memory in the midst of shifting cultural values.”⁷¹ Haas identifies the difficulties of communal memory and the agentic decisions, the validation, and the marginalization of certain traumas and histories that this process inevitably participates in. These struggles are the same issues associated with all memorializations and historicizations of Katrina— is there a best method, most appropriate media, to preserve and relate the memory of Hurricane Katrina? How does one select what memories deserve to be codified? In one answer to these questions, Ratliff’s work engages in a memorialization that emphasizes the personal signification of what Katrina stole, along with the implications for both communities and collective memory.

Things That Float focuses on the impact that the destruction of physical spaces has for communal memories and histories. This angle of memorialization explores the implications of understanding Katrina as the aggregate of moments of quiet trauma, as I have previously established. Simply, the conflation between the destruction of physical spaces with lost memories and the detriment to a community’s understanding of itself and its history is an extension of the massive rupture that small-scale traumas have. The main visual icon of *Things That Float* is the suspended home, a space associated with family, safety, and insulation from the threatening external world. Natasha Trethewey, a Katrina survivor from the Mississippi Gulf Coast and the U.S. poet laureate in 2012, describes the importance of geographic spaces and manmade structures on memories. She argues that “people carry with them the blueprints of memory for a place” and that when the physical structures to which these memories are attributed are destroyed, communities “begin to imagine a future in which the places of [their] past no longer exist [and they] see ruin.”⁷² Ratliff’s focus on the destruction of the home gestures

⁷¹ Kristin A Haas. *Carried to the Wall: American Memory and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, pp. 20.

⁷² Natasha D Trethewey. *Beyond Katrina: A Meditation on the Mississippi Gulf Coast*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2015, pp. 60, 63.

towards a more abstract destruction of memories which threatens the way individuals, families, and communities understand themselves and pass on their culture. When physical structures that define a community are decimated, when those who remembered them have passed, when even the photographs of these significant spaces are ruined, one must ask how this cultural or familial history can possibly survive. In many ways, it simply will not.

But rather than accept this fatalistic outlook, I turn our discussion onto which items float, which objects refuse to be destroyed, and which structures of communal life can be salvaged from Katrina's ruins. With this in mind, *Things That Float* becomes less concerned with countering the dominant narrative than it is with what survives and what it means to have a collective or communal memory. Kristin Haas explains that until the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was constructed "there had been little room in public memory for this kind of detail [talismans of private memories, i.e., a favorite CD]".⁷³ Ratliff's installation engages in a similar kind of work. *Things That Float* prioritizes the intensely private aspects of Katrina that are not necessarily given their due in discussions about the disaster's implications. Although he limits the accessibility of the unique personal loss that the destruction of one's home creates to the signifiers of memories and histories contained within the home, *Things That Float* transforms the private experience of loss into a collective, communal experience, one that demands recognition by viewers outside the affected community. The emphasis on the floating houses, the massive structures that appeared weightless to Ratliff as he paddled through the flooded Ninth Ward, suggests that there remains a visible, viable community even if it appears different than its pre-Katrina existence.⁷⁴ Though the foundations of the floating homes were not strong enough to withstand the hurricane and flooding, these homes remain in the city in a different form, on a

⁷³ Haas, *Ibid.*, pp. 30.

⁷⁴ Ratliff, *Ibid.*

different level, as somewhat altered structures. The suspended homes in *Things That Float* suggest resiliency despite the installation's obvious alterations and manipulations. In spite of the chipped paint, absent doors, and impenetrable roofs, the suspended homes reference an undeniable presence of pre-Katrina structures, of a collection of homes that form a neighborhood and a community. Simply, they resist succumbing to their own destruction. *Things That Float* is invested in what is salvageable from communal ruins, and the resilient collective who insist upon their existence and viability despite horrific moments of erasure and trauma.

More Media, More Fun?



This chapter focuses on the five minute-24 second video created and produced by John Lucas entitled “August 29, 2005/ Hurricane Katrina.” For nearly its entire duration, Claudia Rankine reads the transcript of the episode entitled “August 29, 2005/ Hurricane Katrina: Script for Situation Video comprised of quotes collected from CNN, created in collaboration with John Lucas” which is published in her multi-media book *Citizen: An American Lyric*. The video’s visual elements are layered in three parts. First, black and white documentary photographs of the destruction and flooding caused by Hurricane Katrina endlessly scroll across the frame. The camera slowly rolls from one photograph to another, showing images of dead bodies floating in the floodwater, cars overturned, and people wading. The next layer is a black, white, and red map of the Gulf Coast and its highway system. Atop those layers, the Hurricane Katrina weather radar spins and grows. The green-blue hurricane expands as it did in real time— ultimately, it completely overwhelms the screen. The map becomes impossible to read and the photographs of

the first layer are barely visible. Near the video's end, the weather radar and the map dissipate and only the photographs remain. Meanwhile, Rankine's voice-over concludes, replaced by the sound of rushing water and whipping winds.

The form of this Hurricane Katrina object is distinctive from the other representations I discuss in my previous chapters and thus it affords a different kind of viewer engagement. To some extent, "August 29" is a documentary project. Crucial to my understanding of the work documentary videos undertake are the arguments of Holocaust scholar Amit Pinchevski. Videos that aim to encapsulate moments of trauma and the terror of surviving are crucial aspects of the Holocaust archive and consequently, the theory surrounding these kinds of objects stems from Holocaust studies. Pinchevski argues that while "narrative constructs a sense of progress through time, recording captures the actual flow of time, along with the contingencies occasioned therewith" to explain the different affordances that literary narrative offers in contrast to documentary recording.⁷⁵ Simply, a recording temporally and physically locates the narrative. It creates cause and effect scenarios because its logic can be followed across time. Narratives create a sense of time progression, while documentary recording is beholden to the passage of time as it happens in reality. To that end, viewers anticipate that there is a cohesiveness to the recordings they watch. They expect a stable relationship between a recording's visual and audio components; namely, that these match so that the viewer can sync together these parts of the video.

The expectations associated with recordings and videos are significant for Lucas' project because he abandons these conventions. Lucas' video does not capture time as a recording does. Specifically, Lucas' work does not create a causal relationship between its visual and auditory

⁷⁵ Pinchevski, Amit. "The Audiovisual Unconscious: Media and Trauma in the Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies." *Critical Inquiry* 39, no. 1 (2012): 153.

components. Rather, it encapsulates trauma which fractures memory. Lucas' depiction of trauma inherently challenges a linear narrative and an easy temporal location. The black and white photographs scroll endlessly for the video's duration, but they are grainy and make it nearly impossible to discern individual faces or even expressions—a different version of *Things That Float's* treatment of its photographs. There is no apparent ordering of the photographs: the first captures a man wading in waist-high floodwater pushing a bicycle; the following image shows floodwater engulfing parked cars; the third depicts a nearly indiscernible body floating face down, likely drowned, in the murky water. During the first minute of this video, as these photographs float onto the screen, Claudia Rankine recites the following in a slow monotone:

Hours later, still in the difficulty of what it is to be, just like that. Just the way Stephen said, inside it, standing there, maybe wading, maybe waving, standing where the deep waters of everything backed up, one said, climbing over bodies, one said, stranded on a roof, one said, trapped in the building, and in the difficulty, nobody coming and still someone saying, who could see it coming, the difficulty of that. The fiction of the facts assumes innocence, ignorance, lack of intention, misdirection; the necessary conditions of a certain time and place. Have you seen their faces?⁷⁶

Admittedly, there are certain references that align the video's visual components with its audio. Most poignantly, the photograph of the drowned body slowly rolls across the screen as Rankine says "climbing over bodies, one said," which suggests a synergy between these two forms.

Aside from this instance, though, there are relatively few moments when the photographs depict the material that Rankine describes. This dissonance suggests that the photographic subjects, those whose images are archived and disseminated, are not the same folks that were

⁷⁶ Lucas, John. "August 29, 2005/ Hurricane Katrina." 0:00-1:10.

interviewed and whose words constituted media segments from which Rankine compiled her material. There is a disconnect between what is visually depicted and the auditory description of Katrina, which shows that the photographed victims are not the ones narrating the video through Rankine's mediation. The distance between those photographed and those speaking suggests the possibilities of unrecovered meaning, the plurality of Katrina stories that are not told, that are misrepresented, that are simplified or expanded to encompass all victims and survivors. Consequently, the space between the audible and visual elements of this video points towards the plurality of experiences and the inability of any representation to figure them all.

Even further, though, the dissonance between the visible and audible elements of Lucas's video suggests a fractured temporality that results from extreme trauma. The weather radar of Katrina's storm cycle is the most uncorrupted element of Lucas' video because it is not influenced by personal biases, but informed by scientific observations and data. The weather radar challenges the idea that the hurricane was unexpected, a freak of nature, not something state institutions could have prepared its citizens for. It challenges the "fiction of the facts" Rankine identifies as the randomness that the dominant narrative ascribed to Katrina. Because of the weather radar's progression and growth during the video, it is the latter's best temporal reference, but it is not entirely reliable since it vanishes before the video finishes. As survivors recall their experiences, uncertainty lingers. Although figures like the weather radar help anchor events, the way trauma severs experiences, forces amnesia, and manipulates time cannot be overcome entirely. Through the unclear progression of time in his video, Lucas portrays the breach between personal and collective memories for the viewer who cannot connect the disparate pieces in a satisfying way. Lucas' work is invested in the creations and recreations that fractured memories of trauma create.

More fundamentally, an archive's form inherently influences how traumatic moments are remembered and what creations are possible from these archives. Holocaust scholar Pinchevski and memorialist scholar Haas both discuss the impact that an archive's medium has on memorializations. In Pinchevski's estimation, "to archive something is not simply to consign what is already there waiting to be archived; rather, it is to shape the very construction of that which is archived and hence its future forms of distribution and signification. It is in this respect that the technology of archiving is intrinsic to the act of archiving."⁷⁷ In other words, archiving is not a passive task of compiling histories, testimonies, and other media. The process of archiving, the form that an archive takes, what forms it dismisses, are integral to the way an event is remembered and disseminated to future generations. Though there are significant distinctions between the memorial as a form and the archive, both forms codify history. Thus, Kristin Haas conceptualizes this problem in terms of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. Haas argues that "the design of the memorial was a response to the problem of making memory in the wake of the Vietnam War" and that in response, "this [the Wall] is the history they made."⁷⁸ As Haas articulates, the form of the memorial is influenced by the contradictory, complicated histories and experiences of Vietnam. Moreover, once the Wall was erected, it systematized that history and became the way Vietnam is remembered and conceptualized broadly. Simply, "a memorial gives shape to and consolidates public memory: it makes history," which is why the form of the memorial, or archive, is, as Pinchevski explains, crucial for the kinds of remembering that get codified.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Pinchevski, *Ibid.*, pp. 146.

⁷⁸ Haas, *Ibid.*, pp. 11-2.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 9.

Since Lucas' video does not conduct new interviews, contact survivors, or take fresh photographs, Pinchevski's argument that an archive's form shapes its history renders "August 29" even more significant. Lucas' video is a compilation of various kinds of Katrina media, forced into conversation with each other intensely and overtly. "August 29" is not a public memorial that actively constructs its history as a site of mourning or grief. And yet, Lucas' manipulation of media is significant and shapes the history of this genre of studies and its responses. In a certain sense, "August 29" forges history because it reconceptualizes and recontextualizes Hurricane Katrina and its iconic mass media. The forms Lucas connects and the connections he refuses to make, like that between the audio and visual, challenge preexisting ideas about survivors and their ability to share their experiences, and the sense of completion and totality that mainstream media ascribed to the narratives about affected communities, among other ideas. Lucas' maximalist approach—the onslaught of media, the refusal to place this in a linear narrative with logical space and time conventions—demonstrates that a component of archival work is deciding what forms are included and which forms do not belong to it. Lucas complicates these distinctions as he draws on various forms and nuances their relationships to each other and the Katrina archive as a whole, suggesting the limitations of each form independently and of all forms in the aggregate. These limitations raise the question about which forms, if any, are suited to depict trauma, why they are not included in the Katrina archive, and what cannot be known by the archive as it currently exists.

Although Lucas' video uses a larger variety of media than any of the other Katrina objects that I examine, there is still a gap between the experience of this trauma and what representation of it is possible. Lucas' video suggests not just the limitations of the written word to relate trauma, but of all media. In this sense, Lucas' multimedia video counters Pinchevski's

claim that “as trauma transfers from one generation to the next, the unmediated becomes hypermediated. What defies literary memory is approachable only by means of nonliterary media.”⁸⁰ Pinchevski argues that in the case of second-generation memory, nonliterary media supplement where literature fails in its representation of trauma. Though it is too soon for new generations to inherit the memory of Hurricane Katrina, Pinchevski’s ruminations on hypermediation carry weight. Focused on temporally immediate or adjacent responses, Lucas’ video demonstrates that a key gap in representation remains, despite the work photography, interviews and soundbites, geographic imaging, and scientific data contribute to the understanding of Katrina trauma. Even in the constellation of these diverse forms, the trauma Katrina caused is not fully related. Generally, Lucas suggests that there is no perfect way to encapsulate, represent, and relate trauma. “August 29” emphasizes the gaps in apprehension that remain despite a maximalist approach with form: it remains impossible to see everyone’s faces, to understand everyone’s particular, irreducible suffering. It is necessary, despite the variety of forms, to continually demand “have you seen their faces” because there is always another face, another story, another particular that escapes the video frame.

In spite of their limits, these media still have potential to command thought and awareness of our habits of viewing, apprehension, and social practice. As I have argued, the critical lens and instruction on how to read and understand the visual forms is only apparent through Rankine’s voice-over; merely viewing them without the audio does not challenge their authority or emphasize the limitations of these representations. A similar effect ensues when the audio is considered without the visual elements of Lucas’ video. Without the photographs, there is no specific dominant representation of the storm that Rankine’s performance of the quotations

⁸⁰ Pinchevski, *Ibid.*, pp. 157.

resists. As Sue Robinson argues, the citizens who experienced Katrina “not only rejected MSN’s version [of events], but also that the citizen writer knew the real ‘point’ [originally, writer criticized MSN for ‘missing the point’]” and these citizens asserted their rights to the truth and its dissemination.⁸¹ The folks who survived Katrina recognized the way the media was getting their truth, their lives, their suffering, wrong. A surge of voices actively challenged the depictions they confronted in the media in the wake of the storm, such as the quotations survivors fed journalists, from which Rankine constructed the voice-over. These stories, from a variety of folks within the affected areas, nuanced the narrative told about this community by outsiders. The voice-over asserts the violence and dehumanization that the media’s depiction of survivors engendered. In conjunction with the violent imagery mass media circulated, the sharp criticism in Lucas’ video becomes complicated and impactful. Yet the photographs and voice-over are independently limited because neither offer enough context for an audience’s critical consumption.

The circumstances and reasons that made Katrina what it was, in many instances, explain why the history and memory of this event are muddled, oversimplified, and ignored. Key to the fractured temporality I discuss above is the link between this particular instance of trauma and a history of violence and oppression against the black body. The connection is most obvious in the temporal compression of Rankine’s voice-over. For Leigh Gilmore, the latter “testif[ies] that the urgent need for help arises alongside the knowledge that help will not arrive... the need for immediate help (‘we are drowning here’) locates the speaker in time, but the persistence of need (‘still in the difficulty’) connects the time of disaster to the past.”⁸² Rankine bridges Katrina’s trauma to the long history of violence, of slavery, of disenfranchisement, of dispossession, of the

⁸¹ Robinson, *Ibid.*, pp. 804.

⁸² Gilmore, *Ibid.*

experience of being black in America. Her voice-over references an equally long history of crying out for help and being systemically ignored and institutionally marginalized every time. This moment of difficulty, the particulars of Katrina, are the focus for this trauma, but the idea that this community is “still in the difficulty” is harder to pin down. The difficulty could be Katrina induced trauma, or it could extend as far back as the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the following dehumanization, oppression, and violence perpetrated against the community ever since.

One of the more painful aspects of historicizing a community’s systemic oppression is the uncomfortable hierarchy of suffering that arises. At the core of this concept is the observation that there are some traumatic experiences the global community listens to more carefully and bears witness to more fully than others. Perhaps the most emblematic example of the extreme attention paid to collective trauma is the Holocaust and the ongoing work surrounding it and its memorialization. In contrast, Katrina survivors have had significantly fewer opportunities to disseminate their experiences. Joseph Donica argues that, in the case of Katrina, “the survivors most affected by the disaster had the quietest voice in telling their own stories,” which is a commentary on the issue of access to platforms during and in the wake of the event as well as on the narrative dictated by outsiders about the affected communities.⁸³ There are types of personal histories, of individual suffering, of particular trauma, that American observers and citizens as a community do not want to fit within our conception of our society, state, and nation.⁸⁴ Simply, there are histories that we as a collective do not wish to bear witness for. Katrina’s memory and archive are not dictated by the neoliberal community who purports to care about racial inequality, but by a white supremacist society which is problematic for an event primarily

⁸³ Donica, *Ibid.*, pp. 3.

⁸⁴ Though Spike Lee’s documentary work is an important exception.

disrupting the lives of its black and brown citizens. Here, Susan Sontag's suggestion seems especially relevant: "collective memory should be substituted by 'collective instruction' in order to shift the focus to questions of authority and ideology, that is, who is deciding what should be remembered, who is mediating memory for whom and for what purpose."⁸⁵ Memories are cultivated, codified, and circulated which damages communities who do not control the construction of their own narratives because they, along with their suffering, are marginalized.

The different forms in Lucas' video, though they attempt to portray a wider array of Hurricane Katrina trauma, still do not entirely relate survivors' experiences. Even with the maximalist approach, there is not the right media or enough media to allow viewers to properly bear witness for Katrina's injury and trauma, which suggests that the act of witnessing itself is under scrutiny. Lingering on these images and paying attention to the quoted individuals does not satisfy the audience because the heaviness traditionally associated with witnessing and sharing the burden is absent. Rather, frustrations arise since Lucas' video obscures suffering. Viewers do not feel absolved of their responsibility to these victims, these survivors, this geographic space, this trauma, because Lucas withholds an easily digested, related, and shared narrative. The video's idiosyncrasies demand ongoing engagement from a lingering audience. "August 29" haunts its audience because it cannot be easily resolved. The viewer's inability to categorize Lucas' video revises conceptions of witnessing, usually an act with a finite beginning and ending, because it does not explicitly conclude for those bearing witness.

The interplay between the photographs and the voice-over emphasizes the distinction between the general sufferer and the individual lives impacted by Katrina. As previously noted, the grainy photographs, a sampling of the images circulated in Katrina's visual echo chamber,

⁸⁵ Arnold-de Simone, Silke. "The 'moving' image: empathy and projection in the International Slavery Museum, Liverpool." *Journal of Educational Media, Memory, and Society* 4, no. 2 (2012): Gale Academic OneFile, pp. 24.

are indiscernible in their particulars. The specificity of the voice-over compounds the unknowability, the distance at which the photographs place the audience and the subject. Though Rankine does not attribute the quotations from CNN's broadcast to named individuals, they speak to the multiplicity of Katrina experiences. In this way, the generalizations and vagueness of the photographs starkly contrast with the specific instances that Rankine speaks to. One of the most poignant examples of this opposition arises when Rankine quotes an experience similar to the kinds of images the media replicated. She quotes someone who says "being honest with you, in my opinion, they forgot about us" which was a common sentiment amongst Katrina survivors. The photograph below captures this as well—throng of survivors wait outside the Superdome, hoping the aid they desperately need will arrive. In the photograph, young survivors in an overcrowded, unsanitary, disorganized mass arrests the viewer; on the edges of the image, portions of bodies are visible and the crowd fades into the background in a seemingly endless sea. This photograph encapsulates the immensity of those affected, forgoing the particulars. Though Rankine's quotation above embodies the same sentiment, its scope is more finite. The voice-over focuses on individuals' fear, shock, disappointment, and other innumerable emotions that their particular reactions demonstrate, rather than the generalizations photographs such as the one below create.



Stranded survivors wait outside the Superdome in New Orleans hoping for evacuation and aid.

The key difference between the visual landscape and the auditory soundscape is that media sources reproduced graphic images of violence while the quoted individuals discuss violence and trauma because it is their reality. Simply, the video forces us to confront the difference between voyeurism and experience. For example, Rankine quotes an individual who describes “the missing limbs...the bodies lodged in piles of rubble, dangling from rafters, lying face down, arms outstretched on parlor floors,” which literally speaks to the primary encounter of this horrific moment, in contrast to the voyeuristic effect of violent images that the media circulated.⁸⁶ The unnamed quoted individual speaks from their experience, as does another individual who “didn’t want to shine a [flash]light on all that,” referencing the ruined buildings, destroyed homes, and mangled dead bodies left in Katrina’s wake; in this instance, the quoted individual is unwilling and unable to come to terms with the violently ruptured visual landscape

⁸⁶ Lucas, *Ibid.*, 2:09- 2:22.

after the storm and refuses to make visible the destruction in front of them. Perhaps this is because the media focused on the damage of the disaster in a way only possible for a spectator, obsessively replicating images of trauma. Those who experienced the storm shied away from recounting their stories because of the immediacy of the trauma. As a result, the tension between the photographs and the voice-over emphasizes the dissonance between the reality survivors cannot escape and spectators' obsessive urges to see these sites of destruction.

At large, Rankine contextualizes Katrina as merely the latest iteration of systemic oppression and marginalization, not just an isolated, natural incident. She challenges that “the fiction of the facts assumes ignorance, innocence, lack of intention, misdirection the necessary conditions of a certain time and place.”⁸⁷ The beginning of this criticism explicitly states that the media's version of events is not inherently true, and that in this instance, it is a malicious misrepresentation that argues for the randomness and innocence of Katrina's damage. The received narrative misconstrues institutionalized, purposeful, widespread oppression as ignorance, accidental injury, a one-off destruction of communities and violence. Sue Robinson sees this “fiction of the facts” as inevitable when she argues that “much information is ignored in transmission, especially that which does not fit the symbolic mold of the agreed-upon story.”⁸⁸ As Rankine lyrically describes the ways in which the dominant narrative reorients the willful neglect of vulnerable communities to frame the fallout from Katrina as entirely due to “natural” disaster, Robinson simply explains that there was no space in the circulated narrative for dominant institutions to take responsibility for their actions, which exacerbated the effects of the storm.

⁸⁷ Lucas, *Ibid.*, 0:53- 1:06.

⁸⁸ Robinson, *Ibid.*, pp. 797.

It is noteworthy that two of the projects I analyze directly engage the tension of individuality and abstraction with the survivors and the victims they portray. In the beginning of the voice-over, Rankine departs from the anonymity she uses throughout the rest of the transcript. She uses a specific, personal identifier at the outset when she says “hours later, still in the difficulty of what it is to be, just like that, just the way Stephen said, inside it, standing there, maybe wading, maybe waving, standing.”⁸⁹ In the rest of the voice-over, the speakers are abstract, unidentified individuals and collectives. Yet her reference to an individual remains obscure and I am left wondering who Stephen is— was he a newscaster who belittled the plight of survivors? Was he an individual affected by the storm? Is he even an individual or a representative? What is his positionality to Katrina? Though I remain in the dark about Stephen’s particularity, the significance of his name is not contingent on knowing who he is. His name explicitly highlights that the following quotations are not individualized; I am primed to question why no other names are used, an effect similar to the tension Patricia Smith’s poem “34” creates with abstraction and individuality. In Smith’s work, as I outline previously, this tension is not something the audience should aim to resolve. Her project demonstrates the elusiveness of victim narratives and the need for the artist/documentarian to supplement where the historic record fails to indicate the possibilities of what this trauma took away. Similarly, Rankine’s invocation of a proper name emphasizes what is lacking throughout the rest of the video’s voice-over. Even further, the abject distinction between the named spokesperson and the rest of the anonymous speakers extends to the abstraction that other media engage in, most overtly the grainy photographs. Much like the portrait *Uncertain, yet Reserved* that bookends the written form of “August 29” in *Citizen*, the images in the video are agonizingly generic. Rankine’s departure

⁸⁹ Lucas, *Ibid.*, 0:00-0:26.

from using proper names at this moment in the voice-over parallels the same tension between abstraction and individuality that Smith's poem "34" explores.

Around this issue, Rankine manipulates two social groups to reflect the dichotomy of sentiments that surfaced in the portrayal of Katrina. The first is a chorus, or a group that uses a collective voice to assert their own account which resists the dominant social narrative. Rankine's chorus of Katrina survivors references individuals whose suffering was not validated, shared, or properly understood by the media. The second group Rankine collectivizes is the dominant spectator community, hereafter referred to as such— those who knew Katrina through their television screens, from the safety and security of their distant homes. Since these folks constructed the historic record rather than agitated against it, they are not a chorus. The documentary poet Saidiya Hartman asserts the meaningful collectivity that anonymous quotations create in *Wayward Lives and Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*. Hartman argues that "the chorus bears all of it for us...the chorus is the vehicle for another kind of story...where mutual aid provides the resource for collective action, not leader and mass."⁹⁰ The chorus, a compilation of marginalized voices, has power in its anonymity and abstraction because there is no exceptionalism of the individual. The chorus contains valid, broadly shared moments with the recognition that these experiences are nuanced in their particulars. While there are similarities between the first collective and Hartman's chorus, Rankine's second collective does not align with Hartman's choral voice. In accordance with Hartman's argument, Rankine reads between the lines of recorded history to give a more complex, nuanced voice to those who endured the storm.

⁹⁰ Hartman, *Ibid.*, pp. 348.

The choral quotations emanate from those who experienced the storm, those who had to fight to assert their voices and the validity of their experiences. There is a repetition of “one said” after multiple quotations that Rankine offers in the beginning of the voice-over, which immediately signals that this is not the experience of one person, or the recollection of a single survivor, but a compilation of experiences from countless folks. While this point is fairly rudimentary, it is significant that Rankine emphasizes the multiplicity of voices that she compiles. Another meaningful aspect of the chorus is its expressed disbelief and sense of the impossibility of giving voice to the trauma endured. One woman seems entirely disconnected from her experience as she explains that it “is awful...to go back home to find your own dead child. It’s really sad.”⁹¹ This woman is not crying out, demanding to a higher power to explain why her child is dead; she is at a loss for the proper words to explain the trauma and violence of losing her child. This disbelief in what happened is a marker of the survivor’s chorus that Rankine crafts— a chorus of folks who experienced Katrina in real time in their communities. Perhaps most overtly, Rankine depicts the defeatist attitude embodied by some survivors in the initial aftermath of the storm, an attitude informed by their hyperawareness of how they were being depicted in the media by external voices.⁹² Rankine recreates a conversation: “Call out to them./ I don’t see them./ Call out anyways.”⁹³ The object of this conversation is not named, but the audience can map a variety of state institutions, aid groups, or fellow citizens onto the interaction. In my estimation, “them” references a witness— a photographer, a journalist, a volunteer aid worker, a citizen not impacted by the storm— who, as the speaker notes, is not visible. These groups abandon and ignore the individuals suffering the storm and as a result, the

⁹¹ Lucas, *Ibid.*, 3:14-3:21.

⁹² Robinson, *Ibid.*, pp. 807.

⁹³ Lucas, *Ibid.*, 5:03- 5:10.

dominant memory excludes these survivors' stories. In the aforementioned exchange, one speaker challenges the dominant narrative when they tell another to speak out, give voice to this moment, even though there is no one there to memorialize it. The speaker says "call out anyways"—try to make people hear, try to make room for your cry in the dominant narrative, try to force a reckoning with seemingly no audience.⁹⁴ This interaction encapsulates moments that were excluded from the dominant history of Katrina, but also the ways that survivors fought back against their exclusion and silencing even if their accounts fell on deaf ears.

The spectator collective does not function as a choral voice because it is the entity that crafts the dominant narrative, not representative of those who must fight against its damaging characterizations. The major characteristic of the spectator is that they encountered Katrina from an "aestheticized distanc[e]," as Rankine identifies, mediated through the television screen and journalistic framing. Rankine compiles quotations that exemplify the kind of sentiments rampant in this collective, ranging from infamous quotations by public figures to sound bites peppered into news coverage by ordinary spectators. One of the most infamous responses Rankine uses is from then-First Lady Barbara Bush, who observed that "so many of the people in the arena ...were underprivileged anyways, so this is working very well for them."⁹⁵ Though this quote is indisputably Barbara Bush's, Rankine continues in her style of keeping speakers anonymous and attributes this statement to an unnamed "she." Rankine exemplifies the kind of sentiment that many Americans, celebrity and ordinary, shared: that the folks who were suffering would walk out of this disaster better off than before because of the expectation of governmental and collective aid that would bolster their socioeconomic position. The expectation for survivors to take advantage of aid given or better their situation as a result of Katrina's damage directly

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ "Interview with Barbara Bush." *Marketplace Public Radio*. September 5, 2005.

impacted the speed and rate at which they received aid. The language of the spectators Rankine cites gestures towards the institutionalized marginalization that created the circumstances for the disaster that unfolded after the storm cycle swept through the Gulf Coast. The scholar Henry Giroux argues that the way Katrina was framed by the media, the government's failure to respond, and the widespread sentiments of survivors' opportunism marks a more pernicious idea. He proposes that "the government's failure to respond quickly to the black poor on the Gulf Coast can be related to a deeper set of memories of racial injustice and violence, memories that suggest a link between an apartheid past and the present intensification of its utter disregard for populations now considered disposable."⁹⁶ In other words, the spectator is merely a symptom of the violence and indifference that the neoliberal state creates for populations that are deemed unfit for survival along racial and socio-economic lines.

Ultimately, Lucas and Rankine mobilize their respective forms and put them in conversation with one another to do both political and aesthetic work. At the outset, I argue that no media can do justice to Katrina because of all media's inability to relate trauma as survivors' experienced it. I move from this argument into thinking about the impact that the dedicated negotiation of the limits of any representation, however multi-modal, has. The limitations of multi-media representation do not allow viewers to feel absolved of their duty to bear witness; hence, the witnessing these forms enact is an ongoing one. Perhaps different kinds of witnessing must be created for these kinds of representations. Lucas' and Rankine's manipulation of media implores its viewers: how does one adequately recognize, relate, and recreate a history of violence, oppression, marginalization, and systemic dehumanization that surfaces in a culmination of massive government ineptitude amidst a calamitous natural disaster? It seems

⁹⁶ Giroux, *Ibid.*, pp. 85

insurmountable. But navigating the contours of these limitations, lingering on these representations, devoting more time to these stories attempts to bear witness in a way that does justice to Katrina.

Conclusion

After pages of analysis, I am left with more questions— but different questions, at least, than when I began. Originally, I was concerned with the different kinds of representation that survivors and others outside the community deemed appropriate and best suited for the particular trauma of Hurricane Katrina. As I engaged more deeply with Katrina narratives, I realized that I am more interested in what trauma is and is not knowable and the possibilities for formal representations of trauma. Katrina was merely the exemplar occasion for this analysis.

My first chapter navigates the truth value attributed to documentary work and denied to genres like poetry. In this chapter I explore what truth value or kind of empathetic truth a work of documentary poetics offers in its exploration of traumatic moments. In my second chapter I scrutinize the limitations of a visual form's ability to recreate and represent trauma—not necessarily at large or in summation, but through the infinite small-scale traumas that comprise an event like Hurricane Katrina. My final chapter examines the effect of a multimedia video and how its manipulation of forms creates a representation that is closer to the lived experiences of victims in contrast to the displacement of survivors' experiences that mainstream representations enacted.

Throughout my analysis, I move from least to more complicated form— from a familiar, well-defined genre (lyric poetry) to a welter of contending forms (visual, textual, graphic, multimedia). Despite my attempts to address a range of representations, there is still a gap. There is still space between the experiences of trauma, loss, and suffering that victims endured and how these instances are represented, recreated, and related to those outside the community. I don't think this gap can ever be closed. At the outset of this project nearly a year ago, I hypothesized that with more forms, with a maximalist approach, that closure could be achieved. Simply, I

anticipated that there would be some distinctive arrangement of media capable of relating trauma in its entirety, as it happens in reality. But this project cemented my belief in the limitations of language, of visual culture, of their combined effect, of any kind of aggregation. This is not what I expected would result from my months of inquiries. And yet, this is as far as this thought experiment has brought me: there is always, indisputably, a gap—one that can be mitigated perhaps, but that cannot truly be closed by alternative forms. The inability of media to entirely relate trauma, though frustrating, separates victimhood from appropriation—viewers are unable to fully understand victims’ trauma and cannot assume quasi-victimhood alongside survivors. But the irreducible gap raises the question of what response work such as “34”, *Things That Float*, “August 29”, among innumerable others, demand—what these works expect, work towards, wish to create, and succeed in creating.

Apathy is the easy response. With the recognition that there is always the unspeakable, the unknowable, the indescribable, apathy is simple. It is easy, and sometimes necessary, in a world overrun with images and artistic creation and literary work, to disengage, to dismiss the plea for sympathy, to put on a mask and ignore the tug at your heart. Particularly in this current moment of unprecedented suffering and global crisis, sometimes it is necessary to be hard to survive from one moment to another, in an endless cycle of days that beg for an acknowledgement of worldwide trauma.

Apathy cannot be the solution; perhaps it is analytics or reflective empathy. There is room between the gap and what empathy creates. This is the space where practical knowledge can supplement and enact meaningful changes in policies for communities. This does not require any overpowering emotion; it merely necessitates careful attention. This can be a solution in its outcomes, the work it does, the improvements it offers. But on many levels, practicality is not

enough for me. I still feel that something is missing if we remove emotion from the responses that art produces.

Apathy cannot be the solution because apathy is not a solution. For me, it has to be empathy— radical, overpowering, genuine empathy. An empathy that recognizes the trauma and suffering that can be related through literature and art and other media. An empathy that acknowledges the limitations of these forms but can imagine where this suffering extends beyond what is related. It has to end in empathy and compassion and feeling for one another even if that feeling cannot be related between and beyond individuals. Because the alternative is that we are all islands, alone in our misery and trauma without a way to recognize this sameness in others. It is too heartbreaking to accept that apathy and analytics are the solution. It is too agonizing to accept that on top of the trauma and loss and suffering each individual experiences, every community endures, that they additionally experience it alone with no hope of relation. In sharing, in accepting another's empathy, in offering compassion, each of our burden is lessened. It is through this empathetic trust that we can help each other heal.

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