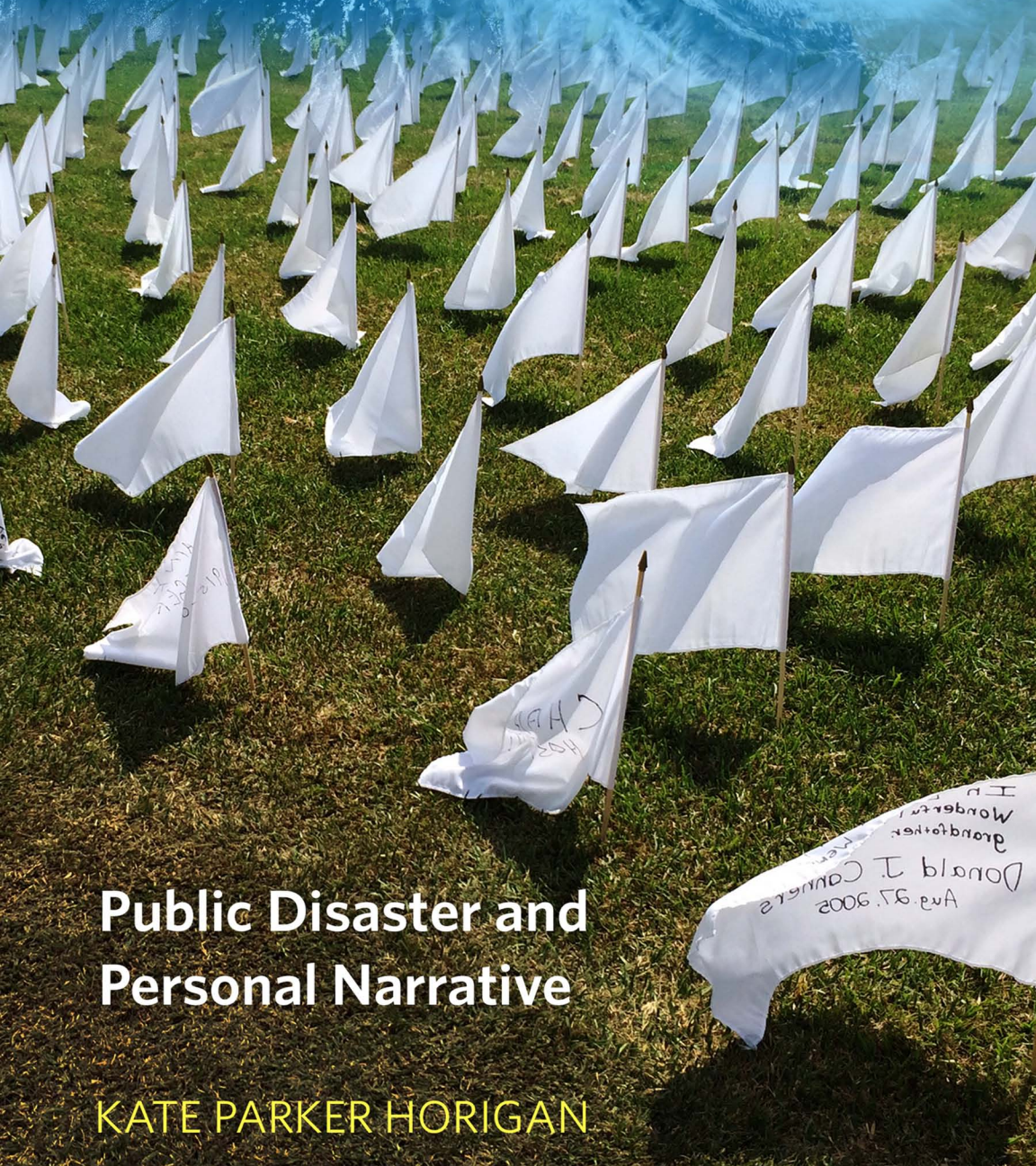# CONSUMING KATRINA

Public Disaster and Personal Narrative

KATE PARKER HORIGAN

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

In August 2005, I drove out of New Orleans in the middle of the night, headed for I-59 in a rattling, red truck. We sat three across the single bench seat—me, my roommate, and her boyfriend—with a large dog squeezed in at our feet. Hitched to the truck was the boyfriend's old boat; in the boat was a wooden crate; and in the crate were six chickens we had been raising in our backyard. Whenever I think about my Hurricane Katrina story, I remember the chickens: towing birds in a boat on a highway was bizarre. Just before the hurricane landed in Louisiana, we arrived in Nashville, where we slept on a friend's floor. We watched every news broadcast; we called everyone we had left behind; we listened first to reports from friends and then later to automated messages telling us the numbers were not available. As the news got unimaginably worse, we cried, we tried to sleep, and we watched more. We searched the web for images of our apartment on Freret Street. We waited. Six weeks later, we knew our place was flooded; eight weeks later we went in to drag what we could from our mold-infested rooms. The mold sent my roommate to the hospital with toxicosis and left me with an olfactory memory like a noxious version of Proust's madeleines. We moved into a new apartment and settled into our strange post-Katrina lives in New Orleans. Years later, I still think about that smell and those chickens.

In October 2009, I sat in an airport bar in Chicago, en route to a meeting of the American Folklore Society, and stared in stunned silence at the stranger next to me as she proclaimed that people in New Orleans had a "victim mentality," and anyone who had not evacuated or did not possess the "gumption" to rebuild on their own was "too stupid to live." First, I thought about sharing with her my own story, all the nuances of evacuation: how I had not wanted to leave but had been persuaded to at the last minute; how the truck needed a jump start, and we almost changed our minds because of that; and how I depended on resources from family and friends outside the city in order to leave. Or I could have attempted to explain the enormous obstacles to rebuilding—financial, physical, social, emotional—including the fundamental fear that the city was not safe. I wanted to convince her she was wrong in believing

in an image of Katrina survivors as helpless and dependent victims, but eventually I ended up walking away, leaving her midsentence, my silent departure the only protest I could muster. I still think about that woman, too, and about the things I could have said to her that might have changed her mind.

There are no ready answers for people who ask you to explain yourself or your city in the aftermath of an event like Katrina, which was, according to the federal government, "the single most catastrophic natural disaster in U.S. history."[1] But there are better ways to frame our questions and contextualize our stories: ways to elicit the kinds of personal narratives that Katrina survivors shared in the Surviving Katrina and Rita in Houston project (SKRH),[2] in interviews that were the catalyst for this book. Reframing the way we talk about disaster allows us to recognize the strategies that survivors employ as they reconstruct and reflect on what they have endured. For many of the interviewees in SKRH, this means narrating the tragedies they witnessed in a way that foregrounds their own compassion and competence in the face of neglect and chaos. For other survivors discussed in the following chapters, they emphasize ambiguity, distance themselves from stereotypical categories, share their awareness about how stories such as theirs might be circulated and received, and protest official modes of remembering Katrina. Paying attention to these rhetorical strategies affords survivors the audience they deserve, and it also paves the way for implementing their own theories about how to cope and rebuild. Survivors are the experts on their own experiences, and as such, the greatest resource for recovery.[3]

After I returned to New Orleans in 2005, I found myself surrounded by people telling the same stories again and again. They were obsessed with Katrina, with describing how they suffered and prevailed. I noticed this in my everyday conversations and in local culture. I saw it in the classes I took, as a graduate student at Tulane University, and later in the writing courses I taught at Delgado Community College. Those narrative responses were in part a show of resistance: New Orleanians were not satisfied with the story as it was being circulated in the national discourse, so, privately, among ourselves, as we went back to work and school, we kept repeating, "This is how it really happened to me." I also had been telling everyone I knew about the chickens, the mold—it was outrageous; it was painful; we kept our sense of humor; we made it. But that is not the kind of story that fits easily into a conversation in the Chicago airport.

Nor are the complex and powerful stories shared in SKRH interviews the kind of stories that get snapped up by publishers, or broadcast on the news, made to represent the generalized experiences of Katrina survivors. The kinds of stories that are easy to share, and that do get widely circulated

and remembered, are those that confirm the expectations of a broad national audience: books like *Zeitoun* and *A.D.: New Orleans after the Deluge*, documentaries like *Trouble the Water*; texts featuring caricatures of heroism, anger, resilience. These are not the complicated narrations wherein survivors enact strategies that advance their own recovery and that ought to inform the formation of public memorials and long-term recovery plans. Rather, they are stories that bear the appearance of the particular—thereby increasing their cultural capital among audiences eager to consume authentic experiences of suffering—but actually reflect dominant narratives about race, class, religion, gender, region, and human response to trauma. Stories such as these propagate dangerously limited and stereotypical representations, which in turn inform responses to disasters such as Katrina. They also allow audiences to feel sympathy for survivors, without feeling complicit in their conditions of suffering or compelled to act. There is, however, great potential for an alternative to such representations, and it already exists in nascent forms, drawn out in the chapters that follow: narrators negotiate the ways their stories are shared, and those negotiations can be incorporated into the stories themselves as they travel beyond communities of survivors. When trauma becomes public, as the insatiable appetite for disaster stories demands that it must, the texts that most ethically adapt personal narratives are those that include survivors' own critical engagement with processes of narrative production.

Personal Narrative and Public Disaster

Major disasters attract the public eye for a complicated array of reasons: empathy for victims, modern media spectacles of suffering, the aesthetic and philosophical appeal of ruins, the political theater that often follows, and our attendant fears about environmental precarity. In recent decades, the attention disasters receive exemplifies another trend, that of interest in the vernacular. Diane Goldstein points out that "the move away from dominant narratives to individual narratives in postmodern culture has elevated the role of storytellers, witnesses, testimony, life story, and personal experience narrative in all aspects of public culture around us" (2015:127). Narratives of massive disaster are incomprehensible in their scale, so in their place we encounter individual narratives of personal experience: the eyewitnesses to catastrophe.[4] Although Goldstein advises that "actual awareness and accountability" can accompany attention to vernacular knowledge and narrative, she also warns of those who are "achieving visual credit through manipulation of interest in the vernacular" (2015:127). It is this sort of manipulation that more often than not characterizes

representations of Hurricane Katrina and other large-scale disasters. When personal narratives are presented as representative of disaster-affected communities, they shape how those communities are seen. As personal narratives are attached to larger dominant discourses, they influence public perception and memory of disaster, and also response and recovery, generally in negative ways. Though this is a disturbing trend, it is also a hopeful site for intervention: folklorists and others who are experts in the circulation of personal narratives can apply their knowledge to observe how individuals are talking about their experiences and to incorporate diverse vernacular responses in the narration, memorialization, and recovery efforts that follow disasters.

To date, scholars have done a great deal to bring attention to patterns in news media representations of Katrina.[5] Most germane to the current study, media representations fell into stereotypes similar to those that populate later published works: "[E]ven while engaging extensively in both reporting and public service, the media also presented highly oversimplified and distorted characterizations of the human response to the Katrina catastrophe" (Tierney, Bevc, and Kuligowski 2006:73). Folklorists have studied aspects of vernacular and official responses to Katrina, including cultural traditions threatened by the hurricane (Abrahams 2006), the legends that proliferated after the storm (Lindahl 2012b; see also de Caro 2013), and the emergence of new rhetorical phenomena in post-Katrina contexts (Gipson 2014; Noyes 2016).[6] This scholarship helps situate my investigation into personal narratives about Katrina, as they have been adapted, publicly circulated, and projected onto the long-term memory of the event. More immediately relevant, however, are current understandings of the complex relationships between narrative, memory, and trauma on a public scale.

Narrators of disaster and other story-worthy events face a crisis in credibility (Labov 1982). They attempt to relate the extraordinary nature of their experience, while at the same time they rely on ordinary narrative conventions (Shuman 2005). When personal narratives of disaster are made public, audiences expect both reportability and credibility, creating a complex set of demands for narrators and publishers alike. Credibility is also subject to cultural expectations based on other prevailing narratives: "[t]he story that is too unfamiliar, too exotic to be believed, and the story that is too familiar are both subject to suspicion" (Shuman 2005:54). Thus, in constructing a story that makes a bid for an audience and for believability, the teller must strike the perfect balance of exceptionality and familiarity. This balance is further complicated by the social aspects of narrative and of disaster.

Despite their name, personal narratives are inherently social in their creation, their transmission, and their function. Like life stories, personal

experience narratives respond to a social need for coherence and follow shared scripts (Linde 1993; see also Titon 1980; Olney 1984; Portelli 1991; Tonkin 1992). As in contexts of illness, where dominant cultural narratives follow a trajectory that personal experience is expected to mimic (Frank 1995), there are predetermined narratives that characterize disaster. As Arthur Frank puts it, "people do not make up their stories by themselves. The shape of the telling is molded by all the rhetorical expectations that the storyteller has been internalizing" (3). Social expectations influence the creation of stories, then, and social relationships also provide the means for making sense of experiences.

When a community is disrupted as in contexts of disaster, individuals lose access to multiple narrative resources: their sense of self, their connection to a group identity, even the material conditions in which their stories are usually told (Tonkin 1992; see also Myerhoff 1992; Cashman 2008). Individuals are still expected to produce coherent narratives, however, and the stakes are heightened in contexts of trauma (Goodall and Lee 2015:8–9). External audiences—such as media outlets, government or other aid agencies, and even strangers—continue to demand a story that makes sense. Narrative coherence garners real rewards for those who manage to convey it, and for those whom it eludes, the negative consequences are just as real.[7] If the rhetorical resources to which individuals turn to construct coherent narratives are not available, then the stories they create will suffer: "Many stories and histories simply cannot be told when the social frameworks are not there" (Plummer 2001:402). As a result, coherence is sometimes imposed on complex narratives by others, as in the case studies that follow, to the detriment of the narrators and their ruptured communities. Thus, under the guise of a survivor's personal narrative, dominant narratives of disaster are delivered to eager audiences.

Dominant narratives frequently become the bases for public memory of disasters, as is the case with "resilience" in the memorialization of Katrina (discussed in chapter 5). Recent scholarship, building on early to mid-twentieth-century work, explores collective aspects of remembering large-scale events. Early views of collective memory, such as those proposed by Maurice Halbwachs (1992), were relatively static, casting people as passive vessels and failing to account for the capacity of individuals to modify memory (Tonkin 1992).[8] Later models have become increasingly dynamic; for example, historian Guy Beiner distinguishes between what constitutes memory as opposed to the actions of remembering, electing to use "the term *social memory* when referring to representations of traditional bodies of knowledge, and *social remembering* (or simply *remembrance*) in reference to dynamic processes of reproduction" (Beiner 2007:28).[9] As Beiner argues and as the chapters that

follow illustrate, "it is possible to positively identify . . . moments of social remembering in action" (28). Social remembering happens in part via the production, circulation, and reception of personal narratives. This circulation is not one-directional; not only do personal narratives shape public memory of large-scale events, but those public expressions also feed back into personal recollections of experience.[10]

Despite their utility, Beiner's categories have not really taken hold, and scholars continue to use "collective" and "social" memory, as well as "public" memory.[11] Goodall and Lee differentiate usefully among terms by claiming that "[c]ollective memory occurs when individuals separately remember the same event," whereas "public memory forms when a people remember in and through inter-subjective relationships with other members of the public" (2015:4–5). Others emphasize this interactive quality as well. In their study of a flooded Australian community, Madsen and O'Mullan write that "while social memories can be associated with historical and cultural artefacts such as memorials," it is also important to focus on "the communication that occurs between individuals and throughout communities that creates narratives and ways of interpreting events such as natural disasters" (2013:60). The following chapters venture into analysis of these social relationships and communications.

The public memory of disaster is enacted in works of art and literature, museums and monuments, special celebrations, and everyday life.[12] In New Orleans, as in other disaster-affected areas,

> the re-telling of stories is as influential as living the experiences. That is, the stories told around the kitchen table, over a beer at the pub, as well as the portrayals of experiences via television news reports, documentaries, and online lay the foundations for social memories that will be drawn on in the future and that will influence how that community responds to future adverse events. (Madsen and O'Mullan 2013:68)

The personal narratives that describe Katrina in public contexts shape how it is remembered. As the memorialization of Katrina in monuments and anniversary celebrations reveals, the themes of those narratives get taken up in published texts and in material and customary culture. This study of Katrina looks at expressions of memory and at how memories take shape, circulate, and gain force in social contexts.

One of Katrina's most complex social contexts is that of shared traumatic experience. The notion of what trauma is and who is a victim of it is complex and historically contingent, and only in recent decades have comprehensive

theories of collective or social trauma emerged.[13] Despite shifts in how trauma has been understood over time, the popular tendency to see "trauma" and "victim" as stable categories can prevent nuanced understanding of the conditions that create suffering (Young 1995; Fassin and Rechtman 2009; Stevens 2009). With respect to Hurricane Katrina, "the people of New Orleans were already victims of poverty and discrimination that reinforced class inequalities through racial distinctions. Trauma is not only silent on these realities; it actually obscures them" (Fassin and Rechtman 2009:281). Likewise, public perception of what makes someone a "legitimate victim"[14] of trauma influences how personal stories of disaster are adapted, often in ways that obscure the lived realities of survivors.

Published accounts of disasters such as Katrina depict individuals as exemplary of massive suffering but also as disconnected from the social structures that produce it and the social networks that can mitigate it. Partly as a result of these representations, only survivors' most recent grievances are acknowledged and remediated, rather than those underlying structural issues that predate and predetermine the crisis. Furthermore, solutions to problems are conceived of in terms of individual redress, rather than communal rebuilding. In contrast to the customary explanation of trauma as a single overwhelming event, "trauma is ongoing and chronic when the social conditions that bring it about are chronic" (Pintar 2006:53). Sociologist Kai Erikson explains that "'trauma' has to be understood as resulting from a *constellation of life experiences* as well as from a discrete happening, from a *persisting condition* as well as from an acute event" (1994:229, emphasis in original).[15] Erikson concludes that communal trauma can take the form of "damage to the tissues that hold human groups intact" (237). A similar model describes social forces that enable trauma as a "machine in which a tie to others and to living are rendered impossible" (Biehl 2005:186). These metaphors suggest a need to investigate what exactly constitutes the connective "tissues" or "ties" in a particular social body—as well as their vulnerabilities as exposed by disaster. In personal experience narratives post-Katrina, the connections that community members lay claim to are different than the individualism that becomes highlighted as their narratives travel to wide audiences (Bock and Horigan 2015). Recognizing and reinstating such ties is crucial to disaster recovery.

Traumatic experiences during disaster are social because of how they are collectively felt and remembered, but also because of the social nature of experience itself:

> Subjects are constituted discursively and experience is a linguistic event (it
> doesn't happen outside established meanings), but neither is it confined to a fixed

order of meaning. Since discourse is by definition shared, experience is collective as well as individual. (Scott 1991:793)[16]

Personal narratives reflect this discourse that "is by definition shared"; they reveal the complex, collective aspects of experience, and they illuminate the processes of social remembrance. When personal narratives are stripped of the social, dynamic contexts that create them, though, they become misrepresentations of experience. Those narratives that reach public audiences and manage to carry along the messy complexities of their social roots are those that bear true potential for a recovery that is also aware and inclusive of the social body.

Ernst van Alphen writes, regarding traumatic experience, "[T]he problem is not the nature of the event, nor an intrinsic limitation of representation; rather, it is the split between the living of an event and the available forms of representation with/in which the event can be experienced" (1999:27). Van Alphen differentiates himself from those who see trauma as a failure of mental integration, whereas he sees the issue as a linguistic or narrative one. Van Alphen emphasizes that if the preexisting language that will make sense of an experience does not exist, that does not mean the experience is not "real" in some sense, but rather that the experience is impossible to make sense of. He argues that this is a semiotic problem rather than a psychological one and that it can be addressed by using modes of discourse other than the historical mode: "[I]f the problem originates in a technical discursive limitation, the realm of the imaginative might be a solution . . . and even provide some privileged access, as it pursues its role of creatively challenging the symbolic order" (van Alphen 1997:42). He explains how he sees these imaginative discourses as capable of representing the "unrepresentable":

> History brings with it more responsibilities than only knowing and remembering the facts . . . Other responsibilities that are poignantly imposed on us involve the working through of the traumatic intrusion of an unimaginable reality, and the foregrounding of the cracks and tears that are concealed by the coherence of the stories being told. It is in relation to those responsibilities that the imaginative discourses of art and literature can step in. (van Alphen 1997:37)

For the ethical representation of traumatic experience, "foregrounding . . . the cracks and tears" is essential. Although van Alphen favors imaginative fictional works, there are places where creative nonfiction texts successfully do this, as subsequent chapters will show. In fact, "cracks and tears" can surface not only in a text, revealing discrepancies between an incoherent experience

and a coherent narrative, but also in the processes by which that narrative is translated from personal to public, in its articulation of the ties that bind social bodies. These ruptures ought to be featured, rather than fixed, in the texts that publicize personal experience of disaster.

Just as Goodall and Lee define public memory as that which occurs "when a people remember in and through inter-subjective relationships with other members of the public," we might conceptualize of a "public disaster" as something more than just an instance of multiple people experiencing the same event. A public disaster is one in which survivors experience traumatic events within the context of social relationships and that also causes harm to those relationships. This idea of "public" extends beyond the communities directly affected by disasters, to those broader audiences who hear stories about the events (and for whom, in many cases, those stories are crafted). The public aspect of disasters is also demonstrated in the rhetoric surrounding their memorialization. In what follows, I apply a model that takes these public dynamics of disasters into account and, consequently, suggests a more ethical approach to circulating the personal narratives that describe them.

Analyzing Interactive Contexts

The narratives that emerge from disaster derive meaning within contexts of social interaction. My study, therefore, attends to various performances and interpretations within such contexts, as personal narratives about Katrina are produced, circulated, and received.[17] In oral narratives from SKRH interviews, for example, I emphasize the rhetorical strategies of narrators, rather than the content of their narration. But interactive context extends beyond the immediate situation of a face-to-face conversation. When Dell Hymes applies his "ethnography of communication," he includes "all elements that constitute the communicative economy of a group" (1974:4). This extends to aspects of context such as the "knowledge and insight" of community members (8), which is especially instructive in the case of Katrina, as survivors interpret how their narratives are circulated and received within and beyond their communities.

The contexts in which narratives are shared are not preexisting ones, but rather ones that are constituted by the interactions themselves as texts are constructed and performed (Duranti and Goodwin 1992). The process by which context emerges in performance has been termed "contextualization" (Briggs 1988:15). In personal narratives about Hurricane Katrina, narrators engage in sometimes subtle and sometimes blatant attempts to shape the contexts of their story's production, circulation, and reception. Unlike those

"[m]any analysts [who] have . . . found it both fruitful and unproblematic to devote their energies to description and analysis of the internal structure of stories while ignoring the interaction through which they were in fact told in the first place" (Duranti and Goodwin 11), I argue for critical attention to these interactions and, furthermore, for inclusion of these interactions into publications that distribute the resulting stories.

Studying "the interactional activity through which narratives are constructed, communicated, and sustained or reconfigured" requires attention to the contexts in which those interactions occur (Gubrium and Holstein 2009:xvii). It also demands investigation into the power dynamics of various contextual influences on those narratives. In the case of disaster stories, the interplay of personal narratives and dominant cultural ones is multidirectional, but the effects these narratives have on each other are not equivalent. Dominant discourses tend to absorb or appropriate the particularities of survivors' stories, with the result of making them familiar to audiences, but also of upholding the interests of powerful groups by reifying those narratives that bestow power on them. Following Gubrium and Holstein, then, I ask not only "how the leading 'big stories' of various settings relate to the individual 'little stories' that participants communicate within them" (2009:124), but also attempt to "demonstrat[e] ethnographically how cultural or organizational resources and preferences are brought to bear in the interactional production or preclusion of particular narratives" (2009:52). I do this by combining analysis of micro- and macrolevels of discourse relating to Hurricane Katrina.[18]

Contextualization cues in the texts determine the elements of interactive context on which I focus. The contexts that are relevant to a particular narrative are those that are indexed by the narrative itself, and they may be distal, proximal, or both. Holstein and Gubrium explain that context is "construed in terms of 'distal' factors such as culture, socio-economic status, or social structure, or more 'proximal' conditions such as interactional settings or sequences" (2004:298). Such broad definitions of context have the potential to be unwieldy; as Briggs puts it, "[t]he task of describing the context thus takes on the form of an infinite regress" (1988:13). Ray Cashman's method for deciding what is "relevant context" helps to address this issue: "I prefer to begin with proximal aspects of situational context as it unfolds moment-by-moment, but then, when needed, I shift to distal aspects of context. . . . Such broader issues require comment, particularly when narrators reference them in the process of contextualizing their stories" (2012:187). Likewise, in my study of Katrina survivors' personal narratives, which comprises a variety of discursive domains, I attempt to keep my focus on the most salient features of text, process, and context. As I draw comparisons among narratives of Katrina

survivors; among the processes through which they are produced, distributed, and consumed in mainstream publications and venues; and among their discursive contexts, the emphases and concerns of survivor-narrators take center stage—as they ought to in the texts that make their stories public.

Conclusion

My study begins, in chapter 1, with analysis of oral narratives shared in the interactive context of interviews for the SKRH project. In these complex and often dramatic exchanges, survivors interview one another about experiences during the hurricane. The speakers use rhetorical strategies that show their concern with telling a coherent story and explaining the consistency of their logic during Katrina's chaos. The interviewers and interviewees also demonstrate careful attention to their interactions with one another, and their exchanges become part of the textual products (recording and transcript) of the interview. Consequently, listeners can observe how the dialogue between participants enables interviewees to exhibit greater control over their own positioning as narrators. Finally, SKRH interviewees emphasize their personal responsibility as narrators in the interactional context of the interviews and as actors in the events they describe. This insistence evokes a dominant narrative of irresponsibility among Katrina's victims that, although it is not explicitly referred to by these survivors, is simultaneously conjured and interrupted by their protestations against it.

When I listened to and transcribed the interviews of SKRH participants, I noticed how participants in this project, on both sides of the microphone, negotiated the context of their communication in order to allow complex narratives to emerge. As I listened to interviewers and interviewees establishing relationships, finding common ground for communication, and sometimes challenging each other, I wondered whether these kinds of negotiations happen in contexts where survivors' personal stories are collected using ethnographic methods such as interviewing, but then adapted for wide mainstream distribution. I discovered that survivors do continue to negotiate the contexts of their storytelling, but in the processes of publishing, these negotiations tend to get edited out or obscured, rather than foregrounded within the stories themselves. The three nonfiction case studies herein were selected because of their popularity and because they are all based—like the SKRH project—on in-depth interviews with Katrina survivors. Therefore, it seemed reasonable to expect to encounter similar kinds of interaction around narrative production that exist in the SKRH collection. What I found, however,

is that more often than not there is only the appearance of that interaction, carefully managed by the authors, publishers, and producers of these texts and made to look like consensus rather than conflict. In chapters 2, 3, and 4, I discuss these three texts and show how they reinforce dominant narratives related to disaster. I also describe the limited instances in which survivors manage to engage with and occasionally challenge their problematic representations.

In chapter 2, I discuss Abdulrahman Zeitoun's Katrina narrative, which has found great commercial success in its adaptation in *Zeitoun*, Dave Eggers's nonfiction bestseller. A version of this story was first shared as a public blog authored by Zeitoun himself, then an interview version was published both in Billy Sothern's *Down in New Orleans: Reflections from a Drowned City* (2007) and in *Voices from the Storm* (2006), edited by Lola Vollen and Chris Ying. Finally, an extended version as told by Dave Eggers was published in Eggers's 2009 book. Zeitoun's story reaches the peak of its circulation when it is told by someone else, an authority figure who vouches for the story's credibility but also promises readers that it is still Zeitoun's personal narrative, the events of Katrina seen "through his eyes" (Eggers 2009b:345). The changes in Zeitoun's story from blog to book, however, reflect a narrative transition from an urgent first-person account laden with ambiguity, to a lyrical drama that offers clear resolution. Ultimately, Dave Eggers presents Zeitoun as a folk hero—an immigrant turned self-made businessman who, when disaster strikes, steps up to battle natural forces and rescue helpless women. When Zeitoun is unjustly incarcerated in Katrina's wake, readers can feel self-righteously outraged at the villains of Islamophobia and the prison-industrial complex. Both the figure of Zeitoun and the public response to him, though, are complicated by later criminal charges against him of domestic assault. Despite Abdulrahman's early involvement in narrating his story himself in his blog and interviews, when it comes to the bestselling book *Zeitoun*, the survivor's engagement with the narration is absent, and the result is a dangerously one-sided picture of a complex individual.

Chapter 3 describes another example of a popular publication based on the narratives of real Katrina survivors: the nonfiction graphic novel *A.D.: New Orleans after the Deluge*, by comic artist Josh Neufeld. The print version of this book was published in 2009, but before that, it was released as a webcomic. In both versions of *A.D.*, the rhetorical and artistic choices of the author, in part influenced by the medium of comics and in part by publishers' demands, reinforce stereotypical categorizations, especially of African Americans. The interactive contexts that are particularly interesting in the case of *A.D.* are the characters' comments on Neufeld's representations of them in

the webcomic. These conversations are similar to the SKRH interviews, where survivors negotiate the terms of their stories' production. Because the webcomic is serial and public, audiences are privy to this dialogue, meaning narrators' negotiations are built into the circulation and reception of the textual product, as they are in SKRH. However, despite his interest in fair representation, Neufeld publishes the print version without the web commentary. This chapter raises questions like those posed by Charles Briggs: "Why do some narratives become authoritative? Why are statements that challenge them erased from public discourse?" (2005:272). In the case of *A.D.*, we see Katrina survivors' challenging statements erased from the eventual print publication of the text.

Chapter 4 examines a final nonfiction, Katrina-based text with wide circulation, Tia Lessin and Carl Deal's 2008 documentary *Trouble the Water*. The filmmakers use unique documentary techniques that incorporate—to some extent—narrators' engagement with the processes of their story's publication. Specifically, the film includes survivor Kim Roberts's own footage, shot during Katrina on her handheld camera. Kim's role as documentarian is foregrounded, and in some striking scenes she expresses her awareness about the value of her story and its likelihood of circulating among particular kinds of audiences. Such scenes prevent the reception of these stories as mere confirmation of what audiences already believe. By incorporating Kim's assessment of the consumption that she knows her story is likely to encounter, the filmmakers successfully integrate survivors' own critiques of the discourses that typically represent them, and in the process, disrupt the easy empathy that often accompanies reception of personal narratives associated with trauma. However, the film's optimistic conclusion evokes a dominant narrative of individualistic uplift, a neoliberal twist that undermines the powerful work the film is otherwise performing.

Chapter 5 focuses on material and customary responses to Katrina and examines how those also tend to oversimplify complex narratives of suffering and recovery. Specifically, I reflect on ethnographic fieldwork conducted during the tenth anniversary of Katrina (in 2015) and observe how memorials, commemorative events, and everyday activities express multiple modes of remembering Katrina. This multiplicity was not exhibited in official discourse regarding the tenth anniversary, which stuck with a single campaign message of "Resilient New Orleans." Vernacular memorialization illustrates the same basic concept evident in previous chapters: people affected by disaster are already engaged in negotiating how that disaster gets remembered, and it is important to listen to those negotiations and not erase them from public representations and discourse.

In my concluding chapter, I review how these "recontextualizations" (Briggs 2005:273) of Katrina survivors' personal narratives reveal the dialogic nature of personal narratives made public, and I explore potential applications for my framework for understanding public disaster. Those narratives that find commercial success, broad distribution, and a place in official memorialization are those that uphold dominant narratives and let audiences off the hook in terms of an ethical obligation to the survivors whose stories they consume. The stories actually being told by survivors—even in the very publications and venues that reinforce prevalent misconceptions—are in fact much more complex than they often appear. After witnessing, myself, the frustration of trying to find the right context for sharing Katrina stories, and struggling to tell the right stories for the contexts we find ourselves in; after hearing the complexity in the content of the SKRH interviews and the negotiations which produced them, I was driven to question how interactive contexts and stories of disaster mutually constitute each other. When trauma is public, as in disasters like Katrina, personal narratives are often the means by which we understand and remember it. Texts conveying the eyewitness accounts of survivors have an obligation to include narrators' critical engagement with the processes by which their stories are being collected and shared. Ultimately, survivors' challenges to their own generalized representations should be incorporated into the discourses of disaster, especially because, as the case of Katrina has demonstrated, those discourses have a great deal to do with response, memory, and recovery.