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Reading Social Trauma in Post-Katrina Narratives: Presentation for Hayes Forum

This paper is an overview of my dissertation project, titled “Reading Social Trauma in Post-Katrina Narratives,” including specific examples of the data I work with and the conclusions I am drawing.

My dissertation is a comparative analysis of narratives about traumatic experiences during and after Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. I see my work as contributing to knowledge about the collective experience of Katrina and its aftermath. Current publications about personal experiences of the hurricane (which I short-hand as “little stories”) are along the lines of literary memoirs, sensational media broadcasts, or decontextualized quotes or images of survivors. Although there are studies that offer historical and cultural context, such as Douglas Brinkley’s *The Great Deluge* or Michael Eric Dyson’s *Come Hell or High Water*, these tend to emphasize the “big stories” of states and agencies without really attending to the personal stories of neighbors and rescue workers. What is missing to date in work on Katrina is a nuanced study of personal accounts in their interactional and discursive contexts (putting “little stories” and “big stories” together). This study is what my research offers, in an attempt to enhance understanding of the conditions that produce narrative accounts of Katrina, and to add to academic knowledge of how individuals construct narratives about collective traumatic experience.

When I started getting interested in these narratives seven years ago—as a survivor myself and as a Masters student in the English Department at Tulane—my research indicated thematic patterns across oral, written, and visual accounts of the hurricane. In terms of content,

for example, there are repeated references to rumors, miscommunication, and literal and figurative contamination. Moving beyond the level of content, however, the analysis in my dissertation explores *how* individuals construct their stories—in order to secure their place in the community of New Orleans—as well as how that community is reconfigured by the circulation of a wide variety of textual and visual representations. I am interested in how individual stories engage with their discursive environment—which I see as constituted by the news media’s representations of “disaster,” by institutional language for establishing victimhood and accountability, and by predominant public perceptions about New Orleans and its inhabitants. Because these stories often anticipate or respond to a culture of skepticism about traumatic memory in general and about the credibility of New Orleans inhabitants in particular, I examine how personal narratives make claims to the truth of their experiences, and how the ways in which they do this change depending on their medium and their audience. These processes merit attention because personal stories have the power to construct or sever communal bonds, and understanding the ways in which they do so will help understand how communities recover from disaster, and how individuals negotiate their role within that recovery.

My interdisciplinary approach to studying these narratives combines theoretical and analytical tools from folklore, rhetoric, and trauma studies. Specifically, I incorporate the ethnography of communication, critical discourse analysis, life writing studies, and critical trauma theory. Ethnography of communication attends to a narrative’s creation within interactions, thereby viewing narrative as dynamic rather than static. Dell Hymes and others provide a “ground up” framework for studying speech within the communities in which it occurs, and I expand that analysis to include interaction with the narrator’s discursive environment. To do so, I turn to the theories of critical discourse analysis. I also draw from

scholars in life writing studies, when I trace the means by which my primary texts make truth claims in shifting genres. Finally, I rely on scholarship from the emerging field of critical trauma studies, which departs from a strictly psychoanalytic understanding of trauma and its influence on memory and narration. The model of trauma that my analysis engages is one wherein individual suffering is not discounted, but rather understood within its social contexts.

My research and writing begins with a corpus of interviews collected for the *Surviving Katrina and Rita in Houston* project, or SKRH, conducted by folklorists Carl Lindahl and Pat Jasper. Following a close analysis of the emergent thematic and formal patterns in these personal interviews, I put the narratives from SKRH in conversation with hurricane narratives from other genres: these other texts include the collection *Voices from the Storm*, part of the *Voice of Witness* series, and the subsequent book *Zeitoun*, written by co-founder of that series Dave Eggers; the book *Nine Lives*, by Dan Baum; the graphic novel *A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge* by comic artist Josh Neufeld; and *Trouble the Water*, a documentary directed by Carl Deal and Tia Lessen.

I have selected these interviews and texts because they all exemplify different approaches to the representation and mediation of lived experience. Rather than maintaining a wide focus on historical events or creating fictionalized representations, these texts make—in varying degrees—claims about their proximity to “historical truth” at the personal level. I investigate how these truth claims, and audiences’ receptions of them, differ based on genre or medium, as well as how—and at what cost—personal accounts are translated into a form that is accessible to larger audiences. Furthermore, each text exhibits different strategies for managing the relationship between the personal narrative, its discursive contexts, and the medium or form through which the narrative is presented. I see these strategies as indicative of the challenges of

narrative representation within the complex domain of collective trauma, and it is my belief that by studying and describing these strategies, we can learn how to better articulate the social dimensions of traumatic events.

I will now turn to two examples of the different kinds of narratives that I am analyzing. The first example contains quotes from the beginning sequences of two texts: the first is an interview with Abdulrahman Zeitoun in *Voices from the Storm*, and the second is the non-fiction bestseller based on interviews with Zeitoun and written by Dave Eggers, who is the bestselling author of his own autobiography and other non-fiction works. In the quote from his interview, Zeitoun relies on first person, and chronological presentation of autobiographical details:

I was born in Syria in 1975. I left Syria around '73. Really, Syria this time in the seventies, there was too much politics, confusion. In Syria, I had a brother who was a captian of a ship. I used to work summertimes after school on the ship with my brother, and we used to make trips to the United States (Vollen 35).

On the contrary, the quote from Eggers' literary adaptation of this life story turns to a highly stylized third person narrative voice, invoking sensory images, and beginning the story in the middle of its narrative action:

On moonless nights the men and boys of Jableh, a dusty fishing town on the coast of Syria, would gather their lanterns and set out in their quietest boats. Five or six small craft, two or three fishermen in each. A mile out, they would arrange the boats in a circle on the black sea, drop their nets, and, holding their lanterns over the water, they would approximate the moon (Eggers 3).

This small but representative example illustrates how, for Zeitoun, telling his story demands different sorts of authentication than that same act does for Eggers. Zeitoun must be

straightforward, logical; Eggers must be suspenseful, lyrical. The kinds of conclusions I draw from this are twofold: genre and audience expectations shape Zeitoun's story just as they do Eggers', and yet Eggers' version is in much higher demand in the literary marketplace. The obvious answer may be "Eggers is a writer and Zeitoun is not," but the less obvious and equally accurate observation is that Eggers produces a version of trauma narrative that we are willing to consume, and if Zeitoun's story sounded like that, nobody would believe him.

Because I begin my study with an interview collection, in some ways I am looking at how first person accounts are transformed in the ways we see in this Zeitoun example. However, the circulation of stories and the shaping of discourse is never a one-sided conversation. So I am also explaining how personal narratives anticipate, respond to, and otherwise engage their various transmissions and receptions. I offer one further example of how this can happen. There is an interview with a young man named Shawn in the SKRH archive. Shawn begins talking about the challenges of rebuilding his flooded home. He suggests that Brad Pitt—whose rebuilding efforts in New Orleans have been widely publicized in popular media—should probably help him out, and hints that maybe his interviewer can help get him in touch with Pitt and other celebrities. Shawn laughingly remarks that the interviewers should call up Extreme Home Makeover, and says, referring to his own recorded story, "if they listen to it...they could help me get a house or something" (Shawn). This example again indicates the awareness on the part of Katrina survivors not only of the kinds of things being said about them and their experiences, but of the kinds of things that *they are being expected to say*, and what is at stake in being heard.

Works Cited

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Shawn (pseudonym), interviewed for *SKRH*, 2006. Interview transcript.

Surviving Katrina and Rita in Houston Database. [2006 -]. Containing information on 433 audio-recorded narratives in FileMaker Pro 8.5 format; 207 interviews completely transcribed and 155 completely keyworded as of September 20, 2010. Houston Folklore Archive, University of Houston, Houston, TX.

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This violation of the social contract undermined the foundational narratives and myths of the American nation and spawned a profound, often contentious public debate over the meaning of Katrina's devastation. A wide range of voices and images attempted to clarify what happened, name those responsible, identify the victims, and decide what should be done. *Is This America?* explores how Katrina has been constructed as a cultural trauma in print media, the arts and popular culture, and television coverage. Using stories told by the *New York Times*, *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *NBC*, and *CNN*, as well as the works of artists, writers, musicians, filmmakers, and graphic designers, Ron Eyerman analyzes how these narratives publicly articulated collective pain and loss. trauma, come to reside in the flesh [of African Americans] as forms of memory reactivated and articulated at moments of collective spectatorship. Over the past decade, cultural sociologists such as Jeffrey Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernard Giesen, Neil Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka have developed a rich literature for understanding trauma in such social, as opposed to psychological, senses. In so doing, they have created a lens and a language through which society can better comprehend what is now known as cultural trauma and have helped lay a foundation upon which remedies to such traumas can be