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# Defining Post-Katrina Literature: Hurricane Katrina and Experiences of Disaster, Race, and Environment

Brandon Galm

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DEFINING POST-KATRINA LITERATURE:  
HURRICANE KATRINA AND EXPERIENCES OF  
DISASTER, RACE, AND ENVIRONMENT

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Brandon Galm

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

December 2018

Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
School of Graduate Studies and Research  
Department of English

We hereby approve the dissertation of

Brandon Galm

Candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Mike Sell, Ph.D.  
Professor of English, Advisor

---

---

Veronica Watson, Ph.D.  
Professor of English

---

---

Susan Comfort, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of English

ACCEPTED

---

Randy L. Martin, Ph.D.  
Dean  
School of Graduate Studies and Research

---

Title: Defining Post-Katrina Literature: Hurricane Katrina and Experiences of Disaster, Race, and Environment

Author: Brandon Galm

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Mike Sell

Dissertation Committee Members: Dr. Veronica Watson  
Dr. Susan Comfort

This dissertation examines three primary texts related to Hurricane Katrina: the 2012 film *Beasts of the Southern Wild*; Jesmyn Ward's 2011 novel *Salvage the Bones*; and the HBO television series *Treme*, which ran from 2010-2013. In addition, the dissertation looks at the role that testimonial narratives of survivors play in the formation of these Post-Katrina texts, by examining those testimonies on their own and in relationship to the literature. The critical approaches utilized throughout include critical race and whiteness studies, ecocriticism and environmental justice perspectives, narrative temporality (including a new concept the author has derived, called the pantemporal event-space), and trauma and testimony analysis provided by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub. By incorporating these various approaches and the ways they intersect in the texts, the author seeks to unify and define Post-Katrina literatures under a working schema for analyzing Post-Katrina texts and their exploration of these themes, as well as providing a mechanism for understanding the racial, political, and environmental forces at play in the disaster itself.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
ONE	INTRODUCTION: MY STORY IS TOLD BY OTHERS(?) .....	1
TWO	“I’M RECORDING MY VOICE FOR THE SCIENTISTS IN THE FUTURE”: <i>BEASTS OF THE SOUTHERN WILD</i> AS PANTEMPORAL EVENT-SPACE .....	41
THREE	DAY BY DAY, BEFORE AND AFTER: <i>SALVAGE THE BONES</i> AND THE PANTEMPORALITY OF SOCIOCULTURAL MEMORY .....	95
FOUR	REBUILDING TAKES TIME: <i>TREME</i> AND THE LONG-EVENT KATRINA .....	150
FIVE	AFTERWORD .....	240
	WORKS CITED .....	252

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure		Page
1	Elton Mabry's Wall Diary .....	35



## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION: MY STORY IS SHARED WITH OTHERS(?)

In the days and weeks after Hurricane Katrina hit, citizens of the Gulf Coast, including many from New Orleans, had stories to share. Many turned to conversations between friends and family. Others shared their thoughts and concerns via email, blogging, and early social media. And others wrote journals, diaries, poems, songs, and stories to testify to what they witnessed. The diversity of narrative that arose out of Hurricane Katrina was as diverse as the city of New Orleans itself. Regardless of the means of dissemination, one thing became abundantly clear: the disaster of Hurricane Katrina—a disaster that included the storm itself and the numerous human-caused, preventable after-effects—produced a moment in which people became witnesses,<sup>1</sup> recognized that their stories must be told, embraced that moment, and used it as a way of testifying to the way the storm revealed the hardships faced by poor citizens of New Orleans, many of whom were people of color. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub explain in their foundational work on testimony, “What the testimony does not offer is... a completed statement... In the testimony... it does not possess itself as conclusion” (5). Throughout the events that began on August 29<sup>th</sup>, 2005, citizens of the Gulf Coast lived and shared what they went through with each other and, in some cases, with the world. Because this event was in progress, the testimony was also flowing and adaptive—incomplete, as Felman and Laub might say. As a result of this incompleteness, it is important to recognize that testimonial narratives do not seek to relate the exactness of

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this dissertation, unless otherwise noted, I refer to “witnesses,” not in the sense of just those who saw or observed, but more precisely what Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub explain as “an appointment to transgress the confines of that isolated stance, to speak *for* others and *to* others.... [The] witness is the vehicle of an occurrence, a reality, a stance or a dimension *beyond* himself” (3).

events, but simply to provide a way of entering them. Felman and Laub write, “testimony will thereby be understood...not as a mode of *statement of*, but rather as a mode of *access to*, that truth” (16). Over time, these Katrina testimonies informed, took more concrete shapes, and in some cases grew into what would eventually become Post-Katrina literature, a body of work both responsive and predictive, reactionary and contemplative, in its attempts to allow readers and viewers access to the events that they might not have had before, because of physical or temporal distance. It is my aim throughout this dissertation to provide a unifying structure to the diverse and varied narratives, both personal and published, that were written in response to the storm and its aftermath. This opening chapter will serve as both an introduction to the dissertation and its approaches, while also examining the role that personal testimonies played during the storm and in the literatures written after.

### **Hurricane Katrina or Katrina**

To preface my intentions and approach to the study of Post-Katrina literature, one thing this dissertation does not do is provide a history of the events of Hurricane Katrina. In the more than ten years since the storm ravaged the Gulf Coast, that history has been recounted numerous times, typically on or near the anniversary of the storm at the end of August. Nor does this dissertation provide a large-scale analysis of the storm and the various racial, economic, and environmental issues that were revealed in its aftermath. Again, this has been written about and analyzed countless times over the last thirteen years. With that being said, I will rely on those analyses and histories in order to understand those issues and events more deeply, specifically in how they are used within literature to retell the tragedy. The writers, directors, and producers of these literatures

speak to the history and struggle of the victims and survivors of Hurricane Katrina directly, whether they intend to or not. This dissertation, then, is focused on the ways that these Post-Katrina literatures are unified, in construction and content, through witnessing to the storm and the people who lived through it, and the specific ways that this witnessing and testimony took shape during the disaster. I take my inspiration for this endeavor from some of the work dealing with Post-Katrina literatures individually, in order to bring about a new way of examining not only these literatures, but also, perhaps, disaster narratives as a whole.

One element of studying Hurricane Katrina and its related areas that I feel is important is establishing a coded vocabulary for referencing and distinguishing between the physical destruction of the storm and the aftermath of policy failures related to that physical event. I take my cue here from William M. Taylor and Michael P. Levine, who explain in their introduction to *The “Katrina Effect”: On the Nature of Catastrophe*, “Katrina was distinctive and arguably the twenty-first century’s default setting and metaphor for ‘worst case’ disastrous scenarios... ‘Katrina’ became a byword, encompassing a wide range of catastrophic failures” (1, 6). The name “Katrina” has become synonymous with the 2005 storm, but more importantly with all of the social, racial, and economic implications of the disaster as well. Even today, as I write this, communities are dealing with the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey as Hurricane Irma intensifies and threatens the Gulf Coast of the United States a week later. Throughout Harvey, the media reaction has largely, though not entirely, compared the responses of Presidents Bush and Trump and compared the experiences of Katrina survivors with those of Harvey. Katrina is the “default setting,” the baseline from which future

catastrophes will be judged. As will be shown later, this was not always the case. What, after all, did Katrina survivors use for their point(s) of comparison?

Because of this default association that the name “Katrina” carries and for other reasons that I will make clear over the course of this chapter, I will be very careful in my usage of “Hurricane Katrina” versus just “Katrina” on its own. Throughout this dissertation, when I refer to “Hurricane Katrina,” I am referring to the physical storm itself and only the destruction or effects directly related to it; when I refer to “Katrina,” I mean the implicit association that the term already carries: the failed governmental response, the breaching of the levees, the spatialized racism while rebuilding New Orleans—and all of those myriad other connotations that appear when we hear “Katrina” and think of the disaster. As an example, Hurricane Katrina caused heavy rainfall that the levees could not handle; Katrina was why the levee breach was not prevented, when numerous reports pointed to their flaws, and the resulting social and political aftermath that occurred with the breaching. While the two concepts, the physical hurricane and what came after it, are certainly joined in ways that cannot truly be separated, I think it is important to distinguish between the two for one reason above any others: Hurricane Katrina could not be prevented; Katrina could have. Taylor and Levine continue their introduction, stating,

The citizens of New Orleans were *not* subjected to a largely unforeseen and spontaneous natural disaster... The record shows how their representatives in ... governments were informed of, but not sufficiently responsive to, the probability that a storm like Katrina would overwhelm the city’s defenses. (3)

Additionally, distinguishing between the hurricane and the aftermath in naming also helps me name Post-Katrina literature. While others may use the term without context, I am very clearly establishing the literature that arose in response was testifying on *Katrina*, and not necessarily the hurricane itself. Again, this is not to undermine or lessen the impact the role the storm played in the disaster event, because it is an important one. I simply want to magnify the notion that Post-Katrina literature is significantly more concerned with *Katrina* than it was with *Hurricane Katrina*.

## **Two Worlds**

Writing about Holocaust testimonies, Shoshana Felman and Dobi Laub explain that the act of witnessing via testimony “is a dialogical process of exploration and reconciliation of two worlds—the one that was brutally destroyed and the one that is.... The testimony is inherently a process of facing loss” (91). This idea of “two worlds” will shape much of this chapter, much of the dissertation, in fact. In one instance, one more closely aligned with Felman and Laub’s comment above, we can understand that idea literally: the space of New Orleans was flooded, ripped apart, tainted, and destroyed—New Orleans was physically altered by the storm. This alteration was unsettling and disruptive, particularly to those most familiar with the areas most harshly affected by Hurricane Katrina. Sara Ford, writing in her blog on October 15, 2005, notes, “It’s amazing how you can drive down a street every day for the first 20 years of your life, then have all the landmarks removed, and next thing you know, you have no idea where you are at” (Joyce Loc 1327).<sup>2</sup> Abram Himmelstein writes, “I am inside New Orleans, only it is not New Orleans.... I struggle to get my bearings” (Loc 821). One understanding that

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<sup>2</sup> Unless other wise noted, all blog posts come from *Please Forward: How Blogging Reconnected New Orleans After Katrina*, edited by Cynthia Joyce.

Post-Katrina literature seeks to reveal to readers is the discomfort and confusion that accompanies the destruction of the familiar—one world becoming two—and the ways that people have used testimony and storytelling as a way of working through or understanding that discomfort.

I will return to the act of testimony in Post-Katrina literature later in this chapter, but for now I want to really examine this concept of “two worlds,” and how Katrina has complicated that in several ways. In their book *Hurricane Katrina and the Redefinition of Landscape*, Demond Shondell Miller and Jason David Rivera explore two concepts that point us towards other ways to see this idea of “two worlds” beyond the simple, literal interpretation of the destruction of Hurricane Katrina and into the more sociopolitical realm of Katrina. Those two concepts are (1) the idea of a disaster landscape and (2) the process of change that occurs to spaces over some span of time. Spaces that are rapidly and/or drastically reshaped in the aftermath of a disaster event Miller and Rivera have named the “disaster landscape.” They write, “*Disaster landscape* is used to differentiate between an area hit by a natural disaster...and the normal physical landscape” (3). When I refer to Post-Katrina New Orleans and/or the Gulf Coast I am most often talking about the disaster landscape of that place, rather than the identity of the space that previously occupied it. These two spatial identities are located in the same location in the environment; however, one is the “normal” experience of being in that space on any given day versus the experience of being in that space after a disaster has hit it. Again, one world becoming two, brought about through memory of the past and existence in the present, but lived simultaneously. I would like to take the concept of disaster landscape and the disruptive experience of being in it one step further and explore the ways that a

disaster landscape becomes normalized over time, and therefore becomes the “new normal.” This can lead us into thinking about the ways that spectacles such as this are slowly forgotten about over time, and the importance of testimony, both personal and fictional, can have in remembering the disaster landscape. Taylor and Levine refer to this as a “waning of affect”. They write,

What is it about the visual representation of disaster that draws us to it...? The idea that our interest in the pictorial representation of catastrophe is simply a manifestation of human beings caring for one another, or merely a cognitive interest in “what happened,” is belied...by the phenomena of disaster ennui and a general lack of concern—a waning of affect—with regard to a disaster’s aftermath and recovery. We seem to need new, bigger, and “better” disasters to hold our interest. (13-4)

If we no longer concern ourselves with issues that need addressed from a first disaster, then they might never be addressed or fixed, because we are now focused on the next one. For those who have no choice but to still talk about—because they are still dealing with the aftermath in some way or another, even thirteen years later—a compounding effect occurs. I am not qualified to talk about the emotional and psychological implications of that compounding, but I can—and will—discuss the ways that Katrina testimony and Post-Katrina literature become compounded over time, using the past to make sense of the present and vice versa.

The second relevant concept that Miller and Rivera employ is the process of change in spaces over some span of time. The span of time is crucial, because if the changes occur too quickly or too drastically at once, our ability to comprehend those

changes is stifled. They deploy a six-step cycle originated by Kyvig and Marty to describe the natural change cycle in urban landscapes: “construction, abandonment, conversion, abandonment, demolition, new construction” (Miller and Rivera 9). For this cycle, the first step, *construction*, refers to the building of something in a previously unoccupied space. Eventually, that new construction will be *abandoned* (second step) and *converted* (third step) into something else using the original construction—a new restaurant moving into a closed restaurants’ building. Again, that space will be *abandoned* (fourth step) for some reason. At this point, it will either be converted into something else or *demolished* (fifth step). If demolishing happens, then the next and “final” step would be *new construction*. “Final” has special emphasis; since this is cyclical there is no finality, only more movement through the cycle. This cycle typically occurs in these increments, and Miller and Rivera explain that skipping one step might occur on occasion, or steps might repeat, but the general cycle continues. In built environments, these changes typically take longer amounts of time to complete, because of urban planning—funding, permits, approval, environmental impact reports, etc.—so people within the community have time to adjust to the new space (Miller and Rivera 9-11). The changes happen so slowly and methodically that they often go unnoticed.

However, when a destructive force ruptures, and then radically slows, or radically accelerates the cycle, which Hurricane Katrina certainly did, people are forced to come to terms with the new space much more rapidly, creating significant cognitive, emotional, and sociopolitical effects. Miller and Rivera argue,

The slow process of becoming attached to a place can be disrupted quickly and create a long-term phase of dealing with loss in addition to repairing...



attachments to places, which is why disruptions to the continuity of a landscape's evolution are potentially devastating to the place attachment indicative to it....

When an extreme change in the physical landscape occurs, significant changes in perception about the place occur that are inherently different from those of the past generations who lived there.... Changes to a place threaten the interpretation of past memories. (10)

When people like Ford and Himelstein were blogging about being lost in their own neighborhoods, they were trying to reckon with a space that was familiar, yet completely foreign. By witnessing and sharing that disconnect, they were attempting to face the loss that they were confronted with. The act of testifying, of sharing one's story, is also an attempt at redeeming the lost narrative, so to speak. That cycle of spatial changes is, in some ways, a spatialized narrative: first this, then that, then this, and so on. When it is broken, the story of that space is also broken, and so these testimonies and literatures were, in some ways, setting the break and giving it a chance to heal. Additionally, as will become more clear later in this chapter and throughout the rest of the dissertation, the temporality of this break is also key in understanding Hurricane Katrina as a rupturing moment, as well as a primary element of Post-Katrina literature. Most importantly, this notion of rupture supports my idea that the storm was a *pantemporal event-space* that Post-Katrina literature seeks to replicate both in form and content.

We can also think about the two worlds of New Orleans in a cultural sense: the reality of life in New Orleans for the majority of its citizens, who were (and still are) poor people of color, compared with perceptions of the city as a tourist destination for debauchery, jazz, and authentic Creole cuisine. This would be the "two worlds"

generated by the inside/outside perspective of the region and is the difference between the French Quarter, what most people think when they think of New Orleans, and the surrounding areas of New Orleans, where people lived in poverty even before Hurricane Katrina came ripping through. Rob Walker explains in a blog post the way that, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, people living outside of the city were requesting from him, someone with an insider perspective, “an explanation of New Orleans, its specialness, and its meaning” (Joyce Loc 342). During the storm, most of those outside of New Orleans did not understand what they were seeing. They did not understand how the New Orleans of television and film was so drastically different from the reality revealed during the storm. So, many of them sought out testimony to help them understand.

Walker explains further:

It may . . . be correct that the perfect metaphor for this carnivalesque place is the mask: the constructed façade that hides another identity, quite possibly a much less attractive one. So many people think of New Orleans as a picturesque vacation town, a zone in which to act wild and crazy for a time in an atmosphere appropriately soaked in the carefree, the possibly dangerous—and the authentic. (Loc 342)

Walker continues his blog post, written just five days after Hurricane Katrina made land fall, with an awareness of how “Katrina will . . . have the effect on many people of feeling that they have seen a mask fall away” (Loc 344). This speaks to both the revelatory and transgressive nature of Hurricane Katrina, the ways that, I will argue, the storm itself can be viewed as a political event that refigures the narrative consciousness of the city and the nation, as well as how Post-Katrina literatures work in keeping that refiguration

going. This political event is another way that Post-Katrina literatures are unified as well, through their explorations of the political, racial, economic, and environmental catastrophes that the storm revealed.

One last way that I will be thinking about the two worlds of pre- and post-Katrina New Orleans concerns the ways that those testimonial narratives used to share during Katrina—interviews, journals, blog posts, even literal writing on walls—functioned not necessarily as a healing tool only. Felman and Laub discuss the impulse to testify that witnesses often feel, and how this impulse is related to survival. They write, “The survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their story; they also needed to tell their story in order to survive” (78). This could be read, perhaps, as impulsive catharsis—a feeling of needing to share, but having that act of sharing allow one to continue to survive and heal. Katrina testimonies, beyond this catharsis, also served as an attempt for marginalized individuals and groups to recognize, try to understand, and to share the way that they have been forced, through ideological and political practice, to always live in “two worlds,” sometimes physically, sometimes ideologically, and sometimes metaphorically. One example of this comes from an interview from the *Saddest Days Collection*<sup>3</sup>, housed at the Amistad Research Center. An interviewee known only as “Condie” says,

There’s lights on. There’s people home. But then you drive through other neighborhoods, and there’s nothing. There’s no lights...it’s quiet. New Orleans is not a quiet place. And the other thing that’s really spooky, is it’s so white. It is the

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<sup>3</sup> All quotes from *Saddest Days* come from transcripts of recorded interviews.

most Caucasian place that you have ever seen in your entire life, and that's not New Orleans either. (10)

This self-awareness was nothing new. In fact, I would argue that many New Orleans' citizens, particularly poor people of color, were trying to get people to listen to the duality of their spatial existence for a long time prior to Hurricane Katrina. For these witnesses, the official, commercial narrative of New Orleans was a lie, a lie that imposed a false sense of time and space on their lives.

Melvin Dixon discusses the ways that African Americans more generally have been forced to negotiate this duality, particularly the duality of nature as both destructive and nurturing, since they have been in America. In his book *Ride out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature*, Dixon writes, "As slave singers knew, nature could be a help or a hindrance to securing deliverance" (34). And later, when discussing how African American writers embraced this duality, he says, "The sewer...settings in the fictions of Wright, Ellison, and Jones have offered two stark and disturbing options: a cradle...or a roaring, watery grave" (57). These quotes demonstrate the ways that space, especially "natural" space, can hold multiple meanings and suggest multiple narrative temporalities simultaneously, particularly for groups that have been relegated to "outsider" status. Can one testify to multiplicities at one time? If so, how does one do so? In looking at testimonies and literatures of Katrina, I am able to demonstrate both the possibilities of this testimony as well as the powerful capabilities it has for responding to, and addressing, catastrophic disaster events.

## **Hurricane Katrina as Transgression**

One last element of general introduction that I need to cover before shifting into my explorations of specific testimonies and their relationship to Post-Katrina literature is the concept of transgression. I use Timothy Cresswell's notions of transgression for my purposes, which he explains, at least partly, as happening "when such actions occur...that the everyday, commonsense relationships between place and behavior become obvious and underlined" (10). Hurricane Katrina in some ways functioned as a transgressive event, one that revealed to people inside and outside of New Orleans the oppressive and exploitative manner in which people of color were treated and viewed by those with power positions, whether ideologically, sociospatially, economically, or politically. This revelation allowed them a vocabulary, of sorts, with which to shape their witnessing, to finally be heard when they had been silenced for so long. It is one thing for scholars to pay attention to these revelations, but what was so critical about Hurricane Katrina was the way that it made everyone, both witnesses and witnesses to the witnesses, more aware of them. Remember, as Felman and Laub state, testimony is about providing access to the event. Testimonial after testimonial shows people engaging with these ideas of transgression, people who might not even be overtly aware that they are engaging with them. Post-Katrina literature more generally, I will argue, attempted to refine these numerous and varied testified experiences into a more singular, unified conversation.

To better understand this notion of Hurricane Katrina as a transgressive political event, I turn to the work that Timothy Cresswell and Jane Bennett have done. Cresswell, in his seminal work *In Place, Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression*, explains the difference between resistance and transgression: *intent*. Resistance,

Cresswell claims, is an intentional, pre-planned event in which a group will call attention to their out-of-place-ness, to the ways that society has placed that group in a position of not-belonging in a particular space. Transgression, on the other hand, is not intentional, but is the way that an individual or group inadvertently calls attention to its not-belonging. Cresswell writes,

Transgression, in distinction to resistance, does not, by definition, rest on the intentions of actors but on the *results*—on the “being noticed” of a particular action. The question of intentionality remains an open one. . . . Transgression is judged by those who react to it, while resistance rests on the intentions of the actor(s). (23)

Because transgression need be neither planned nor intentional, but is merely the result of some action calling attention to particular sociospatial ideological norms, I am arguing that we can, by extension, view Hurricane Katrina in this way. A storm, as a naturally occurring phenomenon, cannot be intentional in its desire to reveal sociospatial normalcy or challenge those norms, so it cannot be seen as resistance. But Cresswell’s notion of transgression allows us to view the storm and its destruction as a revelatory political event, one that called attention to constructed sociospatial inequalities in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast and included a multitude of responses and reactions to the event, and the ways that the event revealed particular sociospatial ideologies of New Orleans and its citizens.

Jane Bennett allows us to take this one step further, as she specifically writes about the ways that nature and natural events can become and be read as political. Her book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* argues that naturally occurring

phenomena and events like the storm can be seen—regardless of agency or intention—as a political act. Bennett explains her approach, using Jacques Rancière’s theories on politics as her foundation, that “a political act not only disrupts, it disrupts in such a way as to change radically what people can ‘see’” (106-7). Using this definition of a political act, combined with Cresswell’s differentiation between resistance and transgression, we can clearly define the natural occurring storm Hurricane Katrina as a political event of transgression that was revelatory in its disruption, and changed radically what people saw happening in New Orleans, and by extension the United States, in terms of race, class, and environment. This is especially true when we consider the act of testifying that occurred during and after Hurricane Katrina, and the various ways that non-scholars and everyday citizens were commenting on these sociospatial ideological constructions that were revealed.

### **Witnessing and Weathering**

Throughout the rest of this chapter, I will be looking at specific testimonial narratives of Katrina survivors as a bridge into Post-Katrina literature, a body of work that needs to be recognized for what it *does* as much as for what it *means*. Post-Katrina literature could not exist without the stories of those who lived through the storm, some of whom we know as survivors, others who were not as lucky. The way that this literature embraces the testimony of these individuals, shapes and creates with it, mirrors testimonial narratives and literatures of past disasters and atrocities. In fact, one of the major elements of Post-Katrina literature, as I see it, is this simultaneous use of past testimony in understanding and testifying amidst a current traumatic experience. Post-Katrina literatures and testimonies, as will be shown throughout this chapter and the rest

of the dissertation, allude—sometimes specifically, other times inadvertently—to other stories from the past. Of course, one might argue that this is an inherent function of literature and art as tools for the humanities: we use stories to make sense of our world, to help us shape our understanding. Post-Katrina literature is unique in the *way* that it shapes our understanding through how we watch, read, listen, or otherwise consume those literatures, and how that understanding then reveals to us the larger sociospatial systems that were responsible for turning the storm Hurricane Katrina into the disaster Katrina.

Returning to Felman and Laub’s work with testimony, another element that is applicable to my attempts to understand Post-Katrina literature through testimonial narratives of those who lived through the storm has to do with temporality. Here, however, I will have to take their work a bit further, as there are some interesting contrasts between what they see as a fundamental component of Holocaust testimony and how I view Katrina testimonies. Felman and Laub propose something they refer to as “the impossibility of telling.” What they mean is that, oftentimes, during moments of tragedy, individuals who could bear witness to the event are either forced to—as in the case of the Holocaust—or choose to remain silent—as in cases where the witnessing comes from marginalized groups who feel they are largely unheard under normal circumstances. The former instance, explains Laub, comes through the way that the perpetrators, in their attempt to rationalize the unprecedented scope of their destructiveness, brutally imposed upon their victims a delusional ideology whose grandiose coercive pressure totally excluded and eliminated the possibility of an



unviolated, unencumbered, and thus sane, point of reference in the witness.

(Felman and Laub 81)

Those who chose to remain silent did so for one powerful reason:

It was also the very circumstance of *being inside the event* that made unthinkable the very notion that a witness could exist...someone who could step outside of the...dehumanizing frame of reference in which the event was taking place, and provide an independent frame of reference through which the event could be observed. (81)

In other words, being inside of the event as it is occurring makes it difficult for outsiders to believe that something so terrible could be happening, because that frame of reference and experience does not exist for those outside. I would argue that when this inside/outside relationship is coupled with the ways that marginalized groups have already been largely silenced during moments where there is no major crisis occurring, that the act of witnessing is even more difficult to engage in. If no one listened before the crisis event, why would anyone do so during the crisis? For survivors of the Holocaust, for example, this silence sometimes lasted decades, as “many of the survivors interviewed... realize that they have only begun the long process of witnessing now—forty years after the event” (79). The temporality of this temporally-distanced witnessing shapes the testimony, particularly in its perceived truthfulness, because, “the longer the story remains untold, the more distorted it becomes in the survivor’s conception of it, so much so that the survivor doubts the reality of the actual events” (79).

Witnessing of Hurricane Katrina was completely different. With access to cell phones, the Internet, and the twenty-four hour news cycle, people were witnessing *and*

witnessing the witnessing in real time. What does this do to the act of testimony? Does this lack of temporal distance between Hurricane Katrina and the act of testifying about it shape truth in the same ways as witnessing and testifying to the Holocaust did? How does access to testimony shape the process of testimony? The amount of testimony during Hurricane Katrina as a result of both word-of-mouth sharing among communities and the constant media coverage was immense. In many cases stories might contradict an event as much as they support the way that it played out. With Holocaust testimony fewer people were testifying, but that is partially because most were testifying long after the event itself. In contrast, during Hurricane Katrina, so many people testified in so many mediums during and through the event. This difference, almost contradiction, in testimonial temporality is something that Post-Katrina literature, I will argue later in this chapter, attempts to rectify through my notion of the *pantemporal event-space*.

Some more recent scholarly work, which seems to in some ways link testimony with environmental concerns comes from Astrida Neimanis and Rachel Loewen Walker's "*Weathering: Climate Change and the 'Thick Time' of Transcorporeality*." While their work never explicitly mentions witnessing or testifying, their overall argument seems to hover around the ways that the environment influences the experience, and perhaps shapes our understanding, of an event. According to Neimanis and Walker, this act of *weathering* is what allows us to not only recognize the social factors playing out in the event, but also give us the language to be aware of the environmental ones as well. They explain their approach as a way to "help us understand climate change and human bodies as partaking in a common space, *a conjoined time, a mutual worlding*" (Neimanis and Walker 560; emphasis mine). That emphasis on mutual experience—both temporal and

personal—is crucial to understanding Post-Katrina literature’s relationship to time, space, and race and to my concept of the pantemporal event-space for the ways that those texts allow us to think about and become aware of all of those concepts in the singular moment of that event. In some ways, Post-Katrina literature lets the reader experience weathering and all of the temporal, social, and environmental elements therein by the ways that it replicates and reimagines the pantemporal event-space of Hurricane Katrina.

### **Pantemporal Event-Space**

I will continue to explore the idea of the pantemporal event-space in other chapters as it is one of the core formal features of Post-Katrina literature’s attempts to reconcile the events of the storm to forms of storytelling that are ill-suited to represent it. Those later chapters, however, will offer a more specific analysis of how I am seeing that particular Post-Katrina text embodying the concept. For the remainder of this chapter, I want to set the idea up more broadly and then move into the particular ways that testimonial narratives are influenced by the event, with Post-Katrina literature then starting from those testimonies and shaping them full circle into a reframing of the pantemporal event, complete with the social, environmental and connected sub-temporalities making up the larger event intact.

A pantemporal event-space, I am arguing, is an event in which individuals within the event are able to experience many temporalities in a singular moment. Additionally, the spatial component is crucial to that experience and convergence of temporalities. Space itself is affected by time, both in the short term and long term. Thus, it is both an event in a temporal sense as well as a spatial one: an event-space. To explain, humans experience time on a different level than nature. We generally do not notice changes on a

geological or climatological scale: mountains erode and shift, seashores increase or decrease, and in recent decades global air and water temperatures have slowly increased. These events occur over decades or centuries, but our ability to perceive time happens on a scale of seconds, minutes, hours, and maybe years, so it is easy for these natural changes to go unnoticed by humans. This might help us understand, somewhat, why many people are resistant to anthropogenic climate change. If it stops being tangible, how can we know it to be real? Additionally, as Neimanis and Walker describe it, citing Rachel Slocum,

Although framed in a language of urgency and impending crisis, “climate change” has taken on an abstract quality in contemporary Western societies. Melting ice caps and rising sea levels “are perceived as spatially and temporally distant” from our everyday lives. (559)

Allen C. Bluedorn explains a similar concept in his book *The Human Organization of Time: Temporal Realities and Experience*. Bluedorn details the difference between *epochal* and *fungible* time. Fungible time refers to units of time that are human-created. Epochal time is defined by events. Bluedorn gives this analogy:

To take an everyday example, is it time for lunch or is it lunchtime? Time for lunch could be determined by hunger, making it somewhat epochal, but in much of the industrialized world the time for lunch is usually signaled by the clock ... and lunch is the activity that fills a fungible time interval. The epochal time analogue, lunchtime, is more apt to be linked to the individual’s internal rhythms.

(31)

Because of the ways that we have structured time for ourselves, it has caused many people to stop listening or become ignorant, in some ways, to the natural rhythms that try to signal particular issues many have stopped paying attention to. Cresswell has argued that ideology can become hidden in space, can become normalized. Bluedorn's analyses of time mirror this idea, because "the distinction between fungible and epochal times has gotten...blurred to contemporary observers.... [B]ecause the lunch hour has become so well institutionalized that it always occurs at the same time, its epochal nature has become intertwined with fungible time" (32). This intertwining partially overlaps with my idea of the pantemporal event-space, with the ways that multiple temporalities can exist on top of one another. However, I argue that a pantemporal event-space makes people aware of those hidden temporalities, of those natural rhythms that some have chosen to ignore through normalization, and this is one reason that this analysis I am proposing is also useful beyond just my work with Post-Katrina literatures. Neimanis and Walker would likely agree with this notion of revelation as well, by bringing the environment and environmental time into the fold of socialized time and our experiences of it.

As I have shown earlier with Miller and Rivera's work in *Hurricane Katrina and the Redefinition of Landscape*, the slower temporal change processes are sometimes crucial to our sense of belonging or feeling comfortable within a particular space. Every so often, however, an event occurs which allows us to recognize these changes, because of the disruption to our normal cycles and routines that they cause: earthquakes let us feel the earth shifting, superstorms like Hurricane Katrina or the more recent, record-breaking Hurricane Irma, gain strength from anthropogenic climate change and show us even more

destruction than what might be typical for a hurricane. In the temporality of the storm-event, we experience the time of the storm as it happens, but we are also able to experience that natural, long-term time that causes the storm to be so powerful.

We can find a parallel in our perceptions of time when we look at human perceptions of social movements. Social changes occur in a similarly slow pace over time, and when progress does happen it is often over long periods of time, rather than in one major moment. However, just as storms and other natural disasters allow us to recognize climate change, there are events within long-term social movements, which can cause major ruptures that allow us to recognize changes that are occurring within that movement (or as will be shown, were thought to have occurred, but perhaps have not). These ruptures can happen as both outside forces acting upon a particular marginalized group or from within the marginalized group as a response/reaction to outside forces. Doug McAdam and William H. Sewell, Jr. discuss this difference in their chapter “It’s About Time: Temporality in the Study of Social Movements and Revolutions,” found in *Silence and Voice in the Study of Contentious Politics*. In that chapter, they explain two primary ways that scholars have tended to think about temporality related to social change and movements: *long term change processes* and *protest cycles*. The key difference between these two concepts closely mirrors my earlier examination of Cresswell’s transgression versus resistance: one form—the long term change—happen in adaptive ways in response to changes not necessarily related to any particular, single event; the other form—protest cycles—are based on active engagement in direct response to an event.

The difference between the human perception of natural temporalities and temporalities of social movements is in what is revealed to us as needing to be addressed, whether it is climate change or social justice or both, as I am claiming happened with Hurricane Katrina as a convergent, transgressive event, preserved through Post-Katrina literatures. From a climate standpoint, changes often occur so slowly that they become almost intangible, so some cannot see problems that need solving. From a sociological standpoint, changes have also occurred slowly over time, yet, ironically, many perceive them as “solved,” and so people cannot see the need to keep focusing on them, regardless of the fact that there are still very real problems facing people within those social movements. So during a rupturing event in social movements—perhaps the recent Baltimore riots could be an example—it reveals to us not the changes that have occurred, like what happens with natural temporalities, but rather that more change is still necessary.

Pantemporal event-spaces, as I want to explore them in Post-Katrina literature, are events in which all four temporalities coincide. During a storm like Hurricane Katrina, we experience the storm as it happens (seconds, minutes, days), but we also recognize it as a rupture in some aspect of climatological, epochal time (a slow build up of climate change, eventually spilling over). Something else occurs during these events which also makes us aware of the sociological elements of the rupture: the transgressive nature of the storm revealed particular ideological aspects of culture and society that many thought long dead or overcome, and we are shown how more work is still necessary, regardless of how it may or may not be hidden from our perceptions on a day-to-day basis. In the singular moment of the storm one was able to experience their own temporality, a shared

temporality of the natural storm, a moment of sociological disruption, and a realization that the slow progress of civil rights was not as far along as one might have imagined. This pantemporal event-space, as I am calling it, emerges as a unit of time-experience that is at once quick and extended, natural and social.

As I briefly mentioned earlier, I think that this concept I am generating is also useful beyond just my work here with Post-Katrina literature. One way that I hope the pantemporal event-space might be used in the future is as a new way of understanding and engaging with intersectionality, both within academia and outside of it. What I mean is that we can use this concept to engage with texts and literatures, but it is also a useful way for us to think about actual events as well. It is a new way of thinking about the intersections of environment and race, but I feel it also has potential for thinking about other intersectional critical theories, such as gender, sexuality, and post-colonial theories, and I hope that scholars more versed in those fields will pick up the work I am doing here and apply it to their own areas of study. The pantemporal event-space allows us to understand and engage with texts and scholarship, in the ways that I am doing throughout this dissertation, but additionally it gives us language with which to examine real world events that disrupt space and time for those within the event, thereby opening and revealing a new way to engage with issues that have been hidden with ideology, to paraphrase Cresswell, and time. In this next section, as I shift my attention to the testimonies of Katrina survivors, this second form of engagement will become more clear.



## **Blown Levees, Past and “Present”**

In order to frame this concept in a more concrete way, I will be using a particular trope that arose during many Hurricane Katrina testimonies, the idea that the levees near poor neighborhoods were intentionally blown with dynamite in order to assuage the destruction of flooding in more affluent areas. I want to consider this myth-building in the context of both my idea of the pantemporal event-space and in terms of testimony as explored by Felman and Laub, particularly in the context of temporality and factuality. As I discussed earlier, Felman and Laub explain the temporal distance between an event and the act of testifying about the event as complicated. This complication stems from several reasons, the most important of which is the ability to recall details over extended periods of time accurately and without outside influence, while oftentimes needing that extended amount of time to truly process living through that event. Again, what is both interesting and problematic about Katrina testimonies is the fact that people were testifying in the moment, without that temporal distance to cloud their memories, yet this false levee blowing myth was shared quite frequently in the days and months after Hurricane Katrina occurred. In other words, even in the immediate moments of the event where memories should be clearest, something still seems to cloud the processing of the event. The particular myth that arose during Hurricane Katrina is important, as will be shown, in establishing the ways that we pantemporally use stories—both real and fictional, past and present—to help us make sense of tragedy and to testify against injustices thought long overcome. As Thomas E. Drabek explains in the first chapter of *The Human Side of Disaster*, “Too often statistical details about a slide of human response—warning, evacuation, or whatever—prevent us from seeing the larger context

of individual experiences” (1). Because we are so often focused on the reality of the situation, the details are often lost in that moment; stories, however, “introduce the experience of disaster” (1).

Some of the interviews found in the *Saddest Days Oral Interview Project* build a concept of understanding not unlike work typically done in the humanities: allusion and critical reading. These are people who are using other fictional narratives in order to make sense and explain what they are seeing, feeling, or otherwise experiencing in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. For example, Chad Charles, in what might be an inadvertently Zizekian move, calling to mind his analysis of 9/11, remembers, “But on Sunday...I woke up and went outside and you know, like you see ‘Independence Day’ [sic]” (3). Charles is framing his experience and recollection through other stories that have come before. He continues, explaining how that connection was a defining moment for him, saying, “You seen how when Will Smith came outside and everybody was packing up and he just looking around and everybody packing their car, and that was when I realized that, yeah, it was real” (3). This moment of clarity is something that will be discussed more fully in Chapter Three, as I look at the novel *Salvage the Bones* and how it approaches ideas of preparedness or the seriousness of the storm. For now, though, the point is simply that fictional stories are, at least partially, a mechanism with which we make sense of the world.

Other interviews mirrored some of the sentiments made throughout the country in general, best summarized as “New Orleans looked like a third world country.” These are those individuals who watched in disbelief that either 1) this could happen here in America or 2) that people actually lived like/through this. An interviewee identified only

as “Maulana” explains, “It was devastating, at a deep human level, this was like some stuff that you see in the third world.... Lot of people didn’t believe that it was New Orleans, but it was. (19) This mirrors the shaping of understanding through fictional stories mentioned above, but does so through a different type of allusion, one based in fact over fiction. For these people, they did not turn to a movie or novel to make sense of what was happening; they turned to actual lived experiences of others in order to shape their understanding and narrative of the experience.

What I am interested in are those who have blended these two concepts in some way, with those who used fictional stories, shared among people as truth, in order to shape their narrative. That idea might seem inherently problematic: if people are sharing false stories, then how is the narrative being constructed not inherently also false? I again turn to the work of Felman and Laub to help me explain. Felman, in a chapter examining Camus’ *The Plague*, explores the relationship between history and narrative. Felman brings up a few key questions early in the chapter: “If the narrative is testimony, a historiographical report whose sole function is to say ‘This is what happened,’ why... does Camus have recourse to the metaphor of the plague? If the *literality* of a historical event is what is here at stake, why not designate this historical event by its literal, referential name?” (Felman and Laub 101).<sup>4</sup> These questions could easily be applied to the testimonies of Hurricane Katrina survivors and to Post-Katrina literature itself. If we are seeking truth through the experience of others, how does their (possibly) flawed recollection or narrative building still serve a positive function overall? Felman continues,

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<sup>4</sup> This is also a helpful moment for further understanding my conscious distinction between *Hurricane Katrina* and *Katrina*.

There is thus a certain tension...between the allegorical and the historical qualities of the event: the allegory seems to name the *vanishing of the event* as part of its *actual historical occurrence*. The literality of history includes something which, from inside the event, *makes its literality vanish*. (Felman and Laub 103, last emphasis mine).

In other words, there is something happening to those who have survived a traumatic event that makes them, in some ways, reject the literal truth of the event. Something makes them seek out the allegorical assignment of meaning through other ways, whether those ways are fictional or objective. Felman explains this as “an apprenticeship in history through an apprenticeship in witnessing,” which comes about through “a *crisis in*, and a consequent *transformation of*, the witness. And it is only through the medium of that crisis that the event can speak, and that the narrative can lend its voice to history” (Felman and Laub 110). To understand Post-Katrina narratives and literature is to accept that the factuality of testimony is often shaky, because it is being constructed before the factuality of history has a chance to establish what is happening or what has already occurred. Paul Ricoeur has shared similar sentiments in his seminal work *Time and Narrative*, particularly in explaining the difference between historians and storytellers. Ricoeur writes,

History as a science removes the explanatory process from the fabric of the narrative and sets it up as a separate problematic. It is not that the narrative is oblivious to the forms “why” and “because,” but its connections remain immanent to the emplotment. For historians, the explanatory form is made autonomous; it becomes the distinct object of a process of authentication and justification. In this

respect, historians are in the situation of a judge: placed in the real or potential situation of a dispute, they attempt to prove that one given explanation is better than another. They therefore seek “warrants,” the most important of which is documentary proof. (175)

Testimony’s goal, then, is not to establish just the event as it occurred, but rather, “The task of the testimony is to impart...knowledge: a firsthand, carnal knowledge of victimization, ... a firsthand knowledge of a historical passage through death, and of the way that life will forever be inhabited by that passage and by that death” (Felman and Laub 111). For Post-Katrina testimonies and literatures, construction and shaping is defined through purpose rather than fact, and it often uses previous testimonies and literatures to develop that purpose, to keep revealing that “carnal knowledge of victimization” that testimony effectively relates.

With this in mind, I want to now turn to the myth building that occurred Post-Hurricane Katrina, specifically around this story that the levees were blown on purpose at the expense of poor neighborhoods. Many of the interviews found in the *Saddest Days Oral Interview Project* mention, sometimes specifically, sometimes generally, that they heard from others the levees had been blown or that they knew it themselves. Brenda Bush, a woman interviewed for that collection, said,

In my mind I think somebody blew [the levee] because it was too many rumors going around that our mayor was wanting to rebuild, wanting to do this and do this to New Orleans, and you know it was so much cracking going on there that I think they really was trying to get people out of there. (4)

In another interview, a woman referred to only as “Callie” helps to explain this more:

“But they say that the mayor of New Orleans blew the levee to save Carrolton where he was from” (4). And one more example, Mitchell Casmere explains,

See, and what I heard, and I can't say it's true, but I don't know, because I wasn't there, but ok now on CNN news, right? They say they found some blasting caps at the 17<sup>th</sup> Street bridge and back there... in the Lower Ninth Ward, you heard me? ... Every time they have a hurricane, that's what these people do. They will open those flood gates up, and they'll let the Ninth Ward flood out. (n.p.)

To reiterate, the common threads between these three interviewees are that 1) the levees were possibly blown on purpose during Hurricane Katrina, 2) they had been blown before, and 3) they were blown because certain lives and communities are more expendable than others. This final point is where the crisis of testimony occurs at the moment where narrative is lending its voice to history, to paraphrase Felman. However, because this is Hurricane Katrina, a pantemporal event-space, history and narrative exist at the same time, in some ways. In other words, previous testimony becomes present testimony; past experience becomes present experience; ancestors' lives overlap with the current generation. Yet, this testimony must also lend its voice to that convergent history, and it does so by shouting, “We're *still* dealing with the same problems!” Again, turning to Ricoeur, this idea of historical-narrative temporality is reinforced. He explains,

On the one hand, historical time appears to resolve itself into a succession of homogenous intervals, the bearers of causal or nomological explanation. On the other hand, it is scattered into a multiplicity of times, depending on the scale of entities considered: the short time-span of the event, the moderately long time-

span of conjunctures, the long time-span of civilizations, the very long time-span of the symbol systems that found the social as such. (177)

Time, narrative, and history can exist on multiple planes—pantemporally. This pantemporality is called upon in moments of testimony, both because past (hi)stories become present ones, and because, according to Ricoeur, they (quite possibly) never stopped existing to begin with.

The truth is that the levees were not intentionally blown during Hurricane Katrina, yet the interviewees mention it as confidently and matter-of-factly as if they were discussing who won a football game. In order to understand how this myth took hold, we have to look at the history of New Orleans, specifically during the 1927 Great Mississippi Flood.<sup>5</sup> During that flood, levees *were* blown on purpose to salvage the parts of New Orleans that the government felt worth saving, and poorer communities on the outskirts were damaged far more adversely as a result. During Hurricane Katrina, the large “explosion” heard near the levees was actually the result of a barge crashing into the levee and causing it to burst. In that moment during Hurricane Katrina, the sound of the levees breaking under a barge triggered a pantemporal awareness of experiences tied into social perceptions of race and place: poor communities of color were perceived as expendable in 1927, and they felt themselves still expendable in 2005. Many of the interviewees in *Saddest Days* explicitly discuss being perceived in this way. Chad Charles states, “Your government don’t give a fuck about you” (10). “Maulana,” when asked whether they thought racism played a part in how Hurricane Katrina was handled, explains, “Yeah, that term racism can be tricky in terms of what people mean... some

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<sup>5</sup> See [http://www.nola.com/175years/index.ssf/2012/01/the\\_1927\\_flood\\_the\\_times-picay.html](http://www.nola.com/175years/index.ssf/2012/01/the_1927_flood_the_times-picay.html) for more details.

people associate it with...conscious choice.... The other to observe the impact of...lack of action on populations” (25). And Alfreda Blaisy just flat out says, “They ain’t concerned about us” (6). This perception, and the cyclical nature of it, makes their testimonies pantemporal: the comments and experiences they are sharing could easily be applied to other people of color and to other moments in that shared history. Again, the slow change process of social movements often goes unnoticed or is incorrectly marked as “progress” when, in fact, many people are still dealing with those issues perceived as corrected.

The persistence of this myth, based in earlier fact and lived experience, repeated through time,<sup>6</sup> is where we begin to see the relationship between testimonials and the pantemporal event-space intersecting. Allen C. Bluedorn talks about this repetitive nature of time. He begins with a quote from Mark Twain: “‘Although the past may not repeat itself, it does rhyme.’ The lack of repetition can be taken to mean the absence of clonelike similarity, but the reference to rhyming indicates some similarity” (34). When these individuals share their ideas that the levees were blown on purpose, they are making an attempt at reconciling their two worlds, one in which they are seen as citizens and another where they are seen as something “less than” or expendable. In order to reconcile these two worlds, they look to the past in order to make sense of what is happening in the present. Dori Laub writes in *Testimony* of the three ways that she sees witnessing play out during the Holocaust: “a witness to oneself within the experience, the level of being a witness to the testimonies of others, and the level of being a witness to the process of

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<sup>6</sup> The myth appeared during Hurricane Betsy as well, in 1965, though like Katrina, seems to be more myth than actual provable event. Interviewees in *Saddest Days* talk about it as if it happened during Betsy as well, regardless of the lack of evidence. I’m concerned less with the factual basis of the levees being blown during Betsy or Katrina, than with the reasons it has become a persistent myth.



witnessing itself' (Felman and Laub 75). Applied to Hurricane Katrina, the first of these three is the act of testifying during the storm. But because Katrina must be read differently than the Holocaust in terms of testifying, because the storm was a pantemporal event-space, the second item—witnessing the testimony of others—takes on a different form. Rather than simply witnessing the testimony of others within the temporality of Hurricane Katrina,<sup>7</sup> this second witnessing also includes the testimony of others' experiences throughout time that mirror, mimic, or overlap with the testimonies of those during the pantemporal event-space of Katrina. By the same extension, the third and final element of Laub is similarly altered during a pantemporal event-space. Witnessing to the process of witnessing becomes a moment of using past testimony to make sense of a current event. The past becomes part of the present by influencing how we understand the current moment; the present becomes directly linked to the past, and people begin to share experience(s) across time.<sup>8</sup>

Another temporal factor that needs to be discussed further in thinking about testimony and the differences between witnesses to the Holocaust and witnesses to Hurricane Katrina is the notion of when the testimony occurs. As stated above, Felman and Laub wrote of the ways that silence hindered witnessing while the Holocaust was taking place and the majority of testimony of it came years or decades after the fact. Hurricane Katrina, however, had witnesses testifying while the storm was still happening. Part of this comes from the technology that was available to us during Katrina versus

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<sup>7</sup> Because Hurricane Katrina is a pantemporal event-space.

<sup>8</sup> A great example, tangentially related to Hurricane Katrina is Ava Duvernay's recent short film titled *August 28: A Day In the Life of a People*, in which the director looks at that date in several years throughout history and the impactful events that have occurred on it. This is a similar notion to what I am presenting: that events occur in the present, but often share a temporal element or experience with other events in the past.

during the Holocaust. Cynthia Joyce, editor of *Please Forward: How Blogging Reconnected New Orleans After Katrina*, explains in the Introduction, “Together, professional and do-it-yourself writers created an online text that was immediate, responsive, and specific to the needs of a traumatized and dispersed community” (Loc 49). The ability to write and post something online in a matter of minutes, which could then be shared and read by people all around the world, fundamentally altered the act of testifying. In the past, witnesses needed time to process the event, to step outside of it. During Katrina, however, it seemed that people were approaching it with a “Testify now, understand later” approach. This should not be read that people were not affected immediately, nor should it dismiss those who were unable to testify<sup>9</sup> immediately. Joyce herself even admits, “For about six months after the storm, my hands shook too hard for me to write down much of anything. I was incredibly grateful ... to all those who, either professionally or quasi-publically, struggled to make sense of that dramatically distorted reality” (Loc 34). My point is simply that to understand the testimonials that were given during Hurricane Katrina, we must also understand that the temporal element of testimonial laid out by Felman and Laub must be adjusted accordingly.

An excellent example of this is the Elton Mabry wall diaries.<sup>10</sup> Mabry lived in the B.W. Cooper public housing development in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina, and beginning on August 28<sup>th</sup> and continuing until the end of October, he used a black sharpie to keep a diary on the walls of his apartment. The diary covered four walls, top to bottom and were simply a quick list of his mundane, day-to-day activities. A sample entry:

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<sup>9</sup> Or whose delayed testimony more closely aligned with testimony as defined by Felman and Laub.

<sup>10</sup> The diaries have been preserved and continue to be on display at the permanent Hurricane Katrina exhibit in New Orleans’ Presbytère Museum.

“Monday→19→Salvation/Monica’s/Domino’s Pizza 11:30 AM; Brought/me back to life; thank you very much!” (Fig. 1).

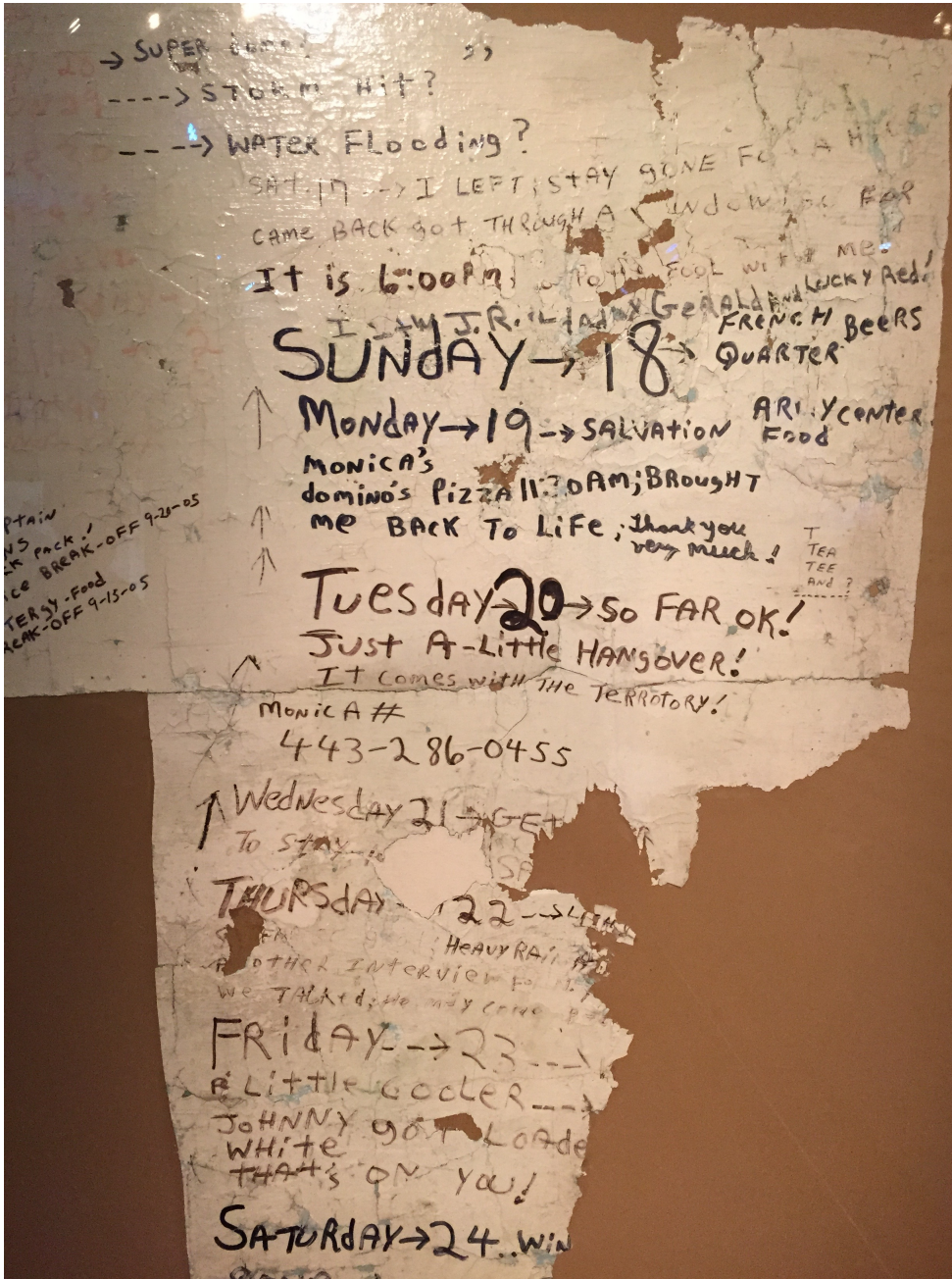


Figure 1. Author’s photograph of one panel of Elton Mabry’s wall diary, housed at the Presbytere Museum in New Orleans.

While the themes that Mabry discusses are not overtly social or political, we can certainly find moments of commentary if we look a little deeper at his entries and consider the

context of where Mabry was living at the time. What I am more concerned with, however, is the steps that he took to ensure his testimony was heard, read, or seen. Cynthia Joyce spoke of the ways that digital communication enabled more testimonies to be shared more quickly and more immediately during Hurricane Katrina. While that was certainly true, I find Mabry's diary even more compelling simply because he used a method far less technologically advanced. While we are lucky to be speaking about the wall diary that he kept, it was far less likely to be read, seen, or covered in the same ways that bloggers' writings might have been. Yet Mabry felt the need to testify in his moment, again, setting him apart from Felman and Laub's temporal distance of testifying. Even without the means to testify to others immediately, by keeping a diary he still testified while the event was occurring. By choosing to write his wall diary, I would argue that he recognized that the event needed to be recorded, that all voices, no matter how small, needed to be preserved.

### **Framing the Dissertation**

As I close out this introduction, I would like to now move into a discussion of what narrative events, precisely, these testimonies sought to provide access to, or reveal to others and to establish some of the frameworks that the remaining chapters of the dissertation will use. Because Katrina triggered so many discussions on such a variety of topics, it can be difficult to pinpoint the actual transgressive elements. Where Holocaust witnesses were testifying to the horrors that they observed, Post-Katrina witnesses testified to racial injustices, environmental issues, economic imbalances, and political inaction (among others) both in how these components played out during the storm and its immediate aftermath, but also, perhaps more importantly, in how these issues were

already in play prior to the storm, thus allowing for Hurricane Katrina to become even more destructive than it otherwise might have been.

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, one thing I do not wish to do is cover large-scale analyses of Hurricane Katrina in terms of race, place, and/or economics. However, it is certainly worth providing some context of how these issues have been covered in the past, in order to understand how testimonial narratives and Post-Katrina literatures seek to contemplate those analyses. As one element of my analyses certainly aims to focus on factors of race and space, primarily as these relate to Hurricane Katrina and its literature and to testimonies of people of color, works such as Michael Eric Dyson's *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster*, Chester Hartman and Gregory D. Squires' *There is No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster: Race, Class, and Hurricane Katrina*, Hillary Potter's *Racing the Storm: Racial Implications and Lessons Learned from Hurricane Katrina*, and the South End Press Collective's *What Lies Beneath: Katrina, Race, and the State of the Nation* will all be referenced throughout this dissertation. All of these explore the racial implications of Katrina, from both pre- and post-storm perspectives. Hartman and Squires' book, for example, looks at Hurricane Katrina as a preventable disaster. They argue that it was not the storm that caused so much destruction for people and communities of color in New Orleans, but rather systemic failures in both preparation and recovery that had such adverse effects on those communities. Potter's book covers similar topics to Hartman and Squires, but she also explores the storm's racial implications on the art and culture of New Orleans, before and after Katrina. As all of my primary texts deal with people of color, directly and indirectly, having a breadth of secondary texts to analyze the myriad

racial impacts of the storm is vital. It is impossible to discuss Katrina without discussing race and class, and the same is true for discussing the literature that arose from the storm. Indeed, many personal testimonies focus on many of these critical analyses as well.

Another primary framework is ecocritical and environmental justice scholarship, which focus on space, place, and the environment, especially as they intersect with larger social justice issues. An interview with Kalamu ya Salaam, a poet and activist associated with the Black Arts Movement, contains the following exchange with the interviewer, which highlights the important role that place and environment played in the storm:

*Q: Is there any way to break through?*

Salaam: Yeah.

*Q: Revolution?*

Salaam: No. I think the environment is the key issue.

...

Because Mother Nature is going to deal with stuff ... change is going to be forced on this country, and it's going to be forces that you cannot fight.

...

It's going to take a minute for people to connect all the dots, but these are historical developments. Things that have never happened before.

...

Much of Plaquemine Parish is no longer dry land, so there's nothing slowing the hurricane... There will continue to be flooding, but then we start dealing with questions of erosion. That's why I'm saying, the environment is the key issue here. (82, 93)

Here again, as throughout, we have an instance of testimony providing insight into a particular set of sociospatial ideological constructions, including aspects of the cultural and economic landscape of New Orleans and how they were reshaped post-Katrina; the environmental impacts of drilling, land development, and the deterioration of wetlands in and around New Orleans; the impact of global warming/climate change; and the spatial responses, and desire of some, to change New Orleans after the storm—both physically and culturally/racially.

Some scholarly works that specifically discuss Katrina through these types of spatial, ecocritical lenses are Naomi Klein's *Shock Doctrine*, Ewen McCallum and Julian Heming's "Hurricane Katrina: An Environmental Perspective," Demond Shondell Miller and Jason David Rivera's previously mentioned *Hurricane Katrina and the Redefinition of Landscape*, and Jenni Bergal's *City Adrift: New Orleans Before and After Katrina*. *Shock Doctrine* explores the idea of "disaster capitalism," a form of capitalism that thrives in the chaos that often occurs after a major catastrophe, in which politicians and economists are able to enact drastic, sweeping changes to policy and places that would otherwise be difficult to pass. These changes often affect poor communities and communities of color negatively, which is, Klein argues, why disaster capitalists wait for these key moments to push the policies through. *City Adrift* includes an analysis of New Orleans and Southern Louisiana as an ecological system, specifically how the natural ecology is failing due to human-made influences like drilling and land development and their impacts on the wetlands. These wetlands are an important natural defense, weakening storms as they move from the ocean over land, but the dwindling wetlands are unable to weaken storms in the ways that they used to be able to.

As I move into the next chapters, I want to conclude with a brief reiteration of the role that testimonies played during Hurricane Katrina and the influence that those testimonies had on Post-Katrina literatures. These testimonies are primarily, but not entirely, coming from everyday citizens and not scholars. This is important because of the way that it highlights both Felman and Laub's notions of testimony and the ways that survivors of disaster or tragedy attempt to reconcile the "two worlds" that they are now confronted with. For Katrina survivors, these "two worlds" are as varied and evolving in ways as diverse as the individuals and groups who survived, but many focus on issues of race and place that were brought into the open during and immediately following Hurricane Katrina. These two worlds were revealed through the pantemporal event-space that was Hurricane Katrina. This pantemporality existed as individuals were made aware and made to experience multiple, overlapping temporalities of both a natural and social order. Post-Katrina literatures, as will become clear throughout the rest of this dissertation, follow through with these testimonies by mimicking. In some instances, this mimicking is thematic: Post-Katrina literature certainly covers topics and issues of racial and spatial ideology. However, what makes Post-Katrina literature so unique are the ways that each of those stories attempts to replicate the pantemporal event-space through form and construction, in order to create a similar experience of the pantemporality in the reader/viewer. By mimicking the pantemporality, the reader/viewer is similarly able to "experience" that rupture in some ways, and can therefore more closely align their reading experience with a more empathetic understanding of the testimonies of survivors.



## CHAPTER TWO

“I’M RECORDING MY VOICE FOR THE SCIENTISTS IN THE FUTURE”:

### *BEASTS OF THE SOUTHERN WILD* AS PANTEMPORAL EVENT-SPACE

Throughout this next chapter I will explore my idea of the *pantemporal event-space* more fully. To refresh, this idea is my notion that disaster events like Hurricane Katrina exist in a temporal space in which multiple temporalities coincide and unfold with each other. These temporalities are long term and short term, environmental and social. I will look at pantemporal event-spaces by examining the ways that the 2012 film *Beasts of the Southern Wild* seeks to replicate the pantemporality of Hurricane Katrina, particularly as it played out in the few days comprising the before, during, and after of Katrina. *Beasts of the Southern Wild* serves as an excellent entry point into this idea. The film demonstrates an awareness of both social and environmental issues, the way that those issues overlap, and, through visual representations of natural phenomena and unique sound design and editing techniques, the film allows the viewer to (re)experience a convergent disaster event like Hurricane Katrina. Additionally, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* is told from the perspective of Hushpuppy, a young girl living in the fictional coastal town known as The Bathtub. She narrates the film in voiceover, offering insight and metaphorical connections for the viewer in ways mirroring the testimonial narratives written in response to Hurricane Katrina, and discussed in my Introduction. In the Introduction to *After the Storm: The Cultural Politics of Hurricane Katrina*, the editors explain that, even though *Beasts of the Southern Wild* never mentions Hurricane Katrina by name, “it can still be read as a text that meditates on the central topics of earlier Katrina narratives, such as race, poverty, and ecology” (Dickel and Kindinger 8). Each of

these topics—race, poverty, and ecology—I am arguing, is framed and represented in the film so that the distinct temporalities of the topics are experienced as overlapping and converging moments in time. Thus, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, although not unique in its presentation of a pantemporal event-space, helps to illustrate the concept of pantemporality, particularly as it played out during Hurricane Katrina. Subsequent chapters will certainly make use of the concept of the pantemporal event-space. As I argued in my introduction, it is a core characteristic of Post-Katrina literature, but I think it is important to focus this chapter on explaining the idea in as much detail as possible. By examining *Beasts of the Southern Wild*'s use of testimonial storytelling and linking it with the core themes and film techniques, I will show how this film replicates the pantemporal event-space of Hurricane Katrina through the film's commentaries on time, environment and connectedness, and constructed-in-isolation sociospatial identities, with each of these commentaries often occurring both simultaneously and independently of each other.

*Beasts of the Southern Wild* (dir. Benh Zeitlin) is set in a fictional Gulf Coast community known as the Bathtub. The story is told from the perspective of main character and narrator Hushpuppy (Quvenzhané Wallis), a six-year-old girl living in the Bathtub with her father Wink (Dwight Henry), who is ailing with a heart condition. The fact that her father's heart is what causes him to die near the end of the film is worth noting, as will become more clear once I begin exploring Hushpuppy's role as a character who possesses pantemporal awareness. Over the course of the film, the audience is given a look at the strange relationship between Hushpuppy and her father, and a closer look at the Bathtub community, including how the Bathtub experiences a Katrina-like storm that

floods the community and leaves a path of destruction. At the same time these more realistic experiences are shown, prehistoric beasts, freed from being trapped in glaciers, stampede towards the Bathtub. The beasts, referred to as aurochs in the film, are a mixture of puppetry, miniatures, and costumed animals. This use of practical effects gives the viewer a sense of something more concrete than digital effects might otherwise have, and, I would argue, also reclaims the arguments it wishes to make regarding climate change from those who wish it to remain fantasy.

The film opens with Hushpuppy listening to the heartbeat of a sleeping hog. This heartbeat is diegetic, immediately framing the audience within Hushpuppy as the narrator and witness with which we will experience the events portrayed in the film. As she begins to move around the space she lives and over the course of the film, the audience is also given visual representations of Hushpuppy and Wink's poverty: windows replaced with tarps; using a cooler in place of a refrigerator; using a refrigerator to store toys and the baseball helmet she uses to light the stove; the area both inside and outside of their trailers are cluttered and filled with rust and ruin; a raft made out of a removed truck bed. These uses of diegetic heartbeats, production design, and *mise en scène* set up an important comparison for the pre- and post-storm Bathtub and are crucial in establishing the film's representation of a pantemporal event-space, all of which I will discuss more in depth as I progress through this chapter.

As stated above, the audience is given a close look at the complicated relationship between Hushpuppy and her father, which is closely tied to the complicated relationship between the Bathtub and the surrounding community. Both her father's approach to raising his daughter, and the Bathtub's perception of the world beyond their border, are

seen as odd, or to return to Timothy Cresswell, as “out of place.” From a “normal” cultural perspective, how Wink treats Hushpuppy and how the Bathtub reacts later in the film towards receiving aid might be looked down upon. This relationship between Hushpuppy and Wink involves them living in separate houses on the same plot of land, at least initially. Wink treats Hushpuppy harshly, in several ways, and the audience is meant to perceive this as him trying to toughen her up or prepare her for the real world. The community itself seems content with its separateness from the outside world, and some critics and scholars have pointed to this as one of the film’s major flaws. One of the most critical reviews of *Beasts* comes from Thomas Hackett’s review from *The New Republic* in which he argues how he sees the film glorifying poverty. Hackett writes,

*Beasts* does something more pernicious than simply celebrate poverty. In casting social workers and public health officials who presume to think that a six-year-old girl should be fed, clothed, and looked after by adults as villains, the film tells us that we needn’t worry, that the poor just want to be left to fend for themselves.

This is the film’s ugly operating assumption: if you are already poor (being black doesn’t hurt either), you are uniquely suited to thrive in squalor. (Hackett)

I agree somewhat with these types of statements, but one element of Post-Katrina literature I would argue that stands in contrast to these, especially when viewing through the lens of critical whiteness, is how the texts reveal a white fragility by showing the resilience, and resistance, of non-white bodies and communities. Not only is white ideology revealed as fragile, but white bodies are also revealed as such as well. *Beasts* is more concerned with the former of these, particularly for the ways that it frames the Bathtub’s reluctance to accept outside influence through Cresswell’s work in *In Place*,

*Out of Place*. In other words, the behaviors of those in the Bathtub are framed as odd or irregular, but in comparison to what? As Miriam Strube argues, “living on a dump, having recycled thrown-away material, being surrounded by objects others have found obsolete is not reflected upon—those objects seem as ‘natural’ to Hushpuppy as nature itself” (47). For the Bathtub community, what some see as incorrect behaviors, they see as normalcy.

### **Testimony In, and Out of, Time**

Because human and animal bodies are situated within shorter-term temporal spaces, we often perceive our experience as being outside of, or removed from, nature and the temporality that our bodies experience. This could certainly help explain, at least partially, many people’s reluctance to accept the reality of human-caused climate change. After all, if our lives are simply a blip in the overall temporality of our planet, how much impact can we really make? The issue with that premise, however, is that it looks at it from an individualistic perspective, rather than collectively. Yes, one person does not warm the planet, but the problematic collective behaviors of many, both in the past and presently, did and still do. By visually representing animals out of time<sup>11</sup>, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* highlights the pantemporality of the storm event itself, in that the chronological events of the film span the time period immediately before, during, and after a Katrina-like storm and are coupled with the prehistoric beasts storming the community, a metaphorical representation of global warming growing stronger. The viewer is therefore able to perceive the overlapping pantemporality of the storm and to

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<sup>11</sup> This should be read in two ways: one, the beasts were frozen in a different time and are awoken in the modern era, therefore becoming out of their own time; two, unless we can make changes to how we affect the planet, we are also animals quickly running out of time.

understand the link between that perception and the ability to recognize how long-term natural processes influence short-term ones.

It is worth mentioning that this entire viewing experience is mediated through Hushpuppy. It becomes clear early on in the film just how much of what we are seeing is flavored with Hushpuppy's understanding of what she hears and sees. The film, while using elements of magical realism and fantasy, therefore does not quite embody either magic/fantasy or reality. Instead, we can read *Beasts* as a story told through the eyes of a child, who is too young to fully grasp the stark reality of her world and situation and must use whatever she can to help make sense of it. This concept, or some variation of it, is partially how I have been describing testimony during and after Katrina. In other words, Hushpuppy is testifying just like other survivors, yet the vocabulary with which she does so is framed around her own experience as a young girl.

However, even as she is the reason for the magical realist elements of the film, Hushpuppy as testifier is also the viewers' link between what occurs in the Bathtub and how we make connections to our own world. Her perception is pantemporal, in that she seems acutely aware of the larger implications of what is happening around her, at least in terms of her narration, and is able to speak profoundly in ways that signal to the viewer that she understands more about her past, present, and future than she lets on in her life as a typical six-year-old girl. She becomes pantemporal in this way; her ability to see the world is influenced by her ability to pull from more than her diegetic temporality. Hushpuppy is also a self-described testifier, as when she says on two occasions in the film, "I'm recording my story for the scientists in the future" (*Beasts*). This statement situates Hushpuppy as someone who is aware of the implications of her testimony

beyond the immediate purpose of merely recording it; she makes known her pantemporal consciousness and the fact that she believes her present will influence the future, that her story can impact others. The past can shape the future positively, and in doing so the “beasts” referenced in the title point to a duality of meaning. Not only could beasts refer to the aurochs, but it can also be read as the citizens of the Bathtub, particularly in how they, and others like them in New Orleans during Katrina, are framed in comparison to the rest of society. Hushpuppy herself is given a direct link to the prehistoric as well. In the first instance that she talks about recording her story for the future, it comes as she hides inside a cardboard box in her living quarters and uses crayon to draw, mirroring a prehistoric cave drawing. As a result of these connections, a beast in the context of this film is something that has a story to share in shaping the future. The aurochs speak for the past and for our present, and Hushpuppy—and even the film itself as a document which can be seen and re-seen—is speaking from the present into the future.

That being said, Hushpuppy’s prescience and deep insight into the world around her stands in stark contrast to many of her actions in the film, which fall closer in line to what we might expect from a six-year-old. After she impulsively runs away and hides, she cannot understand why her father is upset. In a moment of rebelliousness, she accidentally sets fire to part of the house. This juxtaposition of Hushpuppy as prescient and profound narrator with a confused and curious six-year-old only reinforces her pantemporal awareness and is what gives her the ability to recognize and communicate this potentially confusing experience of time to the audience. She speaks as if she has the knowledge of an older self, doing so in a way that mirrors how Katrina survivors used history to make sense of their current situations, a vital narrative strategy I examined in

the Introduction. To refresh, Hurricane Katrina survivors often mixed their testimony about the storm with a history of exploitation and dehumanization, but did so in ways that connected to historical testimonies as they sought to make sense of the space and situation that they found themselves in during Katrina. Many survivors, and even some scholars writing about the storm, spoke of their lack of surprise over what happened as a result of Hurricane Katrina. In considering the ways that those outside of New Orleans responded to the storm, this experience is linked directly to historical awareness. Additionally, when those responses are framed racially, there is a marked difference between white communities and communities of color, with white communities showing far greater surprise that something like Katrina could happen in the United States.

In “The Color(s) of Crisis: How Race, Rumor, and Collective Memory Shape the Legacy of Katrina,” the authors explain,

TV news and talk radio airwaves were filled...with citizens across the United States expressing shock and outrage at what they saw happening along the Gulf Coast.... They could not believe that so many of their fellow citizens were in such peril. However, many of these commentators were *White*. Many Blacks, on the other hand, expressed outrage, but not shock. Why the dissonance? Because despite the shared values of many U.S. citizens across racial lines and regardless of the successes of the Civil Rights Movement, cultural narratives continue to be greatly informed by race. These narratives are based not only on a sense of contemporary shared experience, but more important, perhaps, *on the collective memory of a group over generations*. (Miles and Austin 36, second emphasis mine)



Communities of color were less surprised, because their communities lack support and quality infrastructure even prior to storms, not only in New Orleans but all around the US as well. This lack of support is not a new phenomenon either, with poorer communities of color being historically undervalued and demonized, and those experiences have entered the collective unconscious of current generations as well. Hushpuppy is a character that is so tuned into her environment, both the space itself as well as the history of that space and the beings that inhabit it, that she is able to experience, contemplate, and make known to the viewer multiple temporalities at once. She is a metaphorical embodiment of the collective memory that Miles and Austin discuss, and she embodies it in ways that are both productive and critical. The testimonies/literatures are critical, in that they are attuned to the realities that shaped the aftermath of Katrina and the way that survivors were treated and responded to. Productive testimonies/literatures, in my mind, refer to the active and reactive nature and purpose of sharing those stories. It is not enough to simply “make aware.” As Dori Laub explains,

The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who is...the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time.

By extension, the listener to the trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself. (Felman and Laub 57)

The ways that a listener, or in the case of *Beasts* a viewer/listener, can be brought into the trauma of the testimony is crucial in establishing the reality of the event for the testifier. By letting us hear what Hushpuppy hears, see what Hushpuppy sees, and have the story unfold as Hushpuppy understands it, *Beasts* is bringing the viewer into the trauma, into

the testimony. Her mode of testimony is also interesting in relation to the film itself. Typically, voiceover narration is reserved for someone telling a story that has already occurred. In *Beasts*, however, her voiceover seems to be in the moment. It is closer to what she is currently thinking, rather than a later reaction to it. This positions the audience and Hushpuppy in the present, even as we understand the events and the film have already occurred.

Hushpuppy's testimonial voiceovers, occurring in the immediate temporal space of the event, link with my work in the Introduction, specifically Felman and Laub's work with testimony as containing a temporal gap between the event and the testifying. For their work, the Holocaust occurred, and then after some time, the testimony was shared. Productive and critical collective memory is, I would argue, the foundation on which the testimonial narratives written in response to Katrina are built on, and are one of the key ways that Post-Katrina literature reframes Felman and Laub's concept of testimony. This reframing occurs through the pantemporality of the event by establishing the historical foundations in which the present disastrous circumstances have been built upon. No longer is temporal distance required for testimony, because that distance has converged. In *Beasts*, this convergence of past/present is visually represented on the screen through the aurochs, but those representations are mediated through Hushpuppy's worldview. Something from the past, the aurochs, is used to make sense of the present traumatic event, the strength of the storm as a result of global warming. In Katrina testimony, a trauma from the past, the purposely blown levee, is used to make sense of the present

trauma of the disaster event<sup>12</sup>. Testimony's role within Post-Katrina literature is, itself, to facilitate the convergence: of time, of history, of experience, and of listening, including the trauma inherent within each of those. As viewers/listeners, we have a role to play as well, important in not only making the traumatic event concrete, but also as "another mode of struggle against the victims' entrapment in trauma repetition, against their enslavement to the fate of their victimization" (Felman and Laub 70). If we wish to break these cycles, we have to listen to others, while simultaneously hearing ourselves and our role in the event. Post-Katrina testimony and literature asks us to recognize our place in these narratives, that, even as outsiders, our behaviors shape and impact the lives and environments of those beyond our immediate borders. Post-Katrina literature gives us that opportunity in its representation of the pantemporal event-space by bringing these forces together, and allowing us to see how past, present, and future are closely tied through a narrator who can testify through those temporalities, in her present moment.

### **Disconnection, Reconnection, and Environmental Justice**

Hushpuppy as both a narrator, in voiceover, and storyteller, in how the film's narrative plays out through her perspective, calls attention to the ways that humans have become disconnected from nature, the spaces we live in, and each other. Throughout the film, Hushpuppy utilizes her surroundings to help frame her testimony, continually connecting, reconnecting, and melding what she sees and hears into the story that unfolds on the screen. Oftentimes those surroundings are found in nature, as when she listens to heartbeats, speaks to the beasts, or links natural phenomena to something occurring within the narrative, like her punching her father's chest overlapping with a clap of

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<sup>12</sup> In the Afterward, I will also discuss the role that Katrina-as-event plays in making sense of current disasters, such as those Puerto Rico has been dealing with. This type of testimony did not stop with Katrina, but rather Katrina has become a new referent.

thunder. Other times Hushpuppy is taking elements from others in her community and incorporating those into her narrative, which is how Hushpuppy brings the aurochs into the story, after her teacher talks about them as prehistoric beasts and Hushpuppy sees a tattoo resembling the aurochs on her teacher's thigh. Regardless of incorporating nature or culture, Hushpuppy is framing through connection and the reduction of boundaries. Her introduction to the viewer involves her touching a sleeping hog and listening to its heartbeat. This theme of heartbeats is prevalent throughout the film and is what Hushpuppy uses to connect herself to her environment and everything in it. Each time Hushpuppy listens (or attempts to listen) to a heartbeat in the film, it is accompanied by voiceover narration with another wise-beyond-her-years sentiment from Hushpuppy.

Glenn Jellenik writes,

This quirky activity develops Hushpuppy in several significant ways: it simultaneously displays her innocence and naiveté, her scientific curiosity, and her intense connection with nature. But most of all, it fleshes out Hushpuppy's assumption that our whole world and everything in it has a heartbeat that you can hear if you just listen closely enough. (225)

Ironically, however, whenever Hushpuppy tries to hear her father's damaged heart beating, it is either never heard diegetically, or is obscured by something else making it difficult to discern for Hushpuppy and the audience. We too are able to hear the beats of animals early in the film and even some horses as Hushpuppy and her father float by them in a boat made from the bed of a pick-up truck. Because Hushpuppy is willing to listen to the heartbeats of other animals, she is far more connected to the natural world and her own environment than most of us are. The second moment that Hushpuppy

listens to a heartbeat sees her holding a crab up to her ear, as she says in voiceover, “One day there will be no Bathtub” (*Beasts*). This statement, hinting at the disappearance of the Bathtub mixed with the film’s focus on and representation of climate change, establishes this idea of listening as reconnection for the reader as a crucial step in working against global warming’s impacts on those most at risk.

Environmentally speaking, the film is asking the viewer—challenging them even, to recall the productive-critical moment from above—to stop ignoring the voice of the natural world, and to listen to the symptoms we can see every day, if we choose to. The alternative to not listening at all times, the film implies, is that it often takes a major disaster like Hurricane Katrina, made more destructive because of climate change and global warming, for us to engage in a conversation with nature, to listen to its pains, so to speak. *Beasts of the Southern Wild* is criticizing our reactive tendencies to only address issues when it is too late, or after a problem has occurred. Had those of us who have become most disconnected listened all along to the messages and warnings being sent from that space, both natural and social, then perhaps the disaster could have been mitigated, if not altogether avoided. Of course, that is idealized. If it were that simple, perhaps we would not be continually facing the same problems over and over again. The film, while certainly portraying listening as an optimistic goal, also understands the complexities inherent in listening, of sifting through information to arrive at a particular narrative. Hushpuppy does this through her incorporation of various stories, animals, magic, and experience into her testimony. As she listens, her narrative—the one we watch as viewers—takes shape. As explained above, listening to testimony is not simply hearing what one has to say, but it is a practice that is shaped by what we already believe,

what we have already experienced, and how we allow ourselves to become a part of the testimony as its constructed.

In an instance later in the film, members of the Bathtub have been gathered up and taken to a shelter, where they are cleaned up and given medical treatment. Wink is shown lying in a hospital bed, connected to monitoring machines. Hushpuppy leans down and tries to listen to her father's heartbeat, using what she has always known, rather than relying on machines, to analyze the health of an object. Interestingly in this instance, however, her methods are drowned out by the sounds of the machines beeping and whirring. Wink's heartbeat is drowned out for both Hushpuppy and the viewer as the sounds of the machines take over. As viewers our ability to listen to her testimony is complicated in this scene, mirroring our complicated understanding of why the Bathtub is rejecting the aid to begin with. The film is asking more of us as listeners within testimony, to understand how difficult it can be to continue listening to traumatic testimony, but why we must persevere. Laub argues for the ways the listener has a role to, without being too obtrusive or too distant, "keep alive the witnessing narration; otherwise the whole experience of testimony can end up in silence" (Felman and Laub 71). In situating testimony through Hushpuppy's mediation, the film is utilizing and reworking the listener's ability to fully allowing a testimony to be shared, even as it presents moments, ideas, or experiences that are at odds with the listener's own ideology. Often testimony can remind the listener of "our own historical disfiguration... They pose for us a riddle and a threat from which we cannot turn away" (73-4). Yet, Laub also tells us that there is something to be learned from facing that threat of discomfort, and *Beasts* is asking the viewer to do just that.

This all, perhaps, makes perfect sense in the context of listening to the testimony of people, but again, *Beasts* also shows us through Hushpuppy the importance of listening to the testimony of nature. The solution is not merely as simple as just listening to the heartbeat, as she explains those as being “talking in codes” (*Beasts*). We also need to understand *how* to read that code and be proactive in continuing to do so. Otherwise it is simply people continuing to put themselves into the *perspective* of nature, not fully investing themselves as part of it. They insert their identity into the environment and care less about what is *actually* best for the natural world, and more about what they *think* is best because of how it may or may not benefit them primarily. This misunderstanding, I would argue, is due to a disconnection from nature and environment(s). Those individuals tend to view themselves as not being part of nature, even though we are just highly evolved animals ourselves, affected by—and able to affect—our environments as much as any other animal is.

For as much time as the film spends showing the poverty of the Bathtub and of Hushpuppy and Wink’s homes, it spends just as much, if not more, looking at the beauty of the natural world. Many of the constructed environments in the film, from homes to bars to schools are seen as almost blending into their surroundings, yet still sticking out. They have become a part of the environment, with trees and plants growing on and through them, yet their constructedness is still obvious. One of the most powerful scenes showing this juxtaposition between natural and constructed environments comes after the storm has hit and Hushpuppy and Wink float around the Bathtub in their raft made from the bed of a pickup truck. As they travel along, this the first real instance the audience gets for the surrounding natural environment that the Bathtub is situated in. The luscious

green trees give way to flattened-out marshland, all while this makeshift raft of rusted metal floats by. The stark contrast between the environment and their transportation establishes this idea of the human/nature disconnect, but one that Hushpuppy rejects. When the raft pulls up to a bank, Hushpuppy pulls a leaf off of a tree and holds it up to her ear, mimicking the same behaviors she has been doing throughout the film to listen to heartbeats. After she listens to it, she begins to eat it. Her behavior here indicates, again, an awareness beyond her years, one that recognizes her place within the larger natural cycle and environment, rather than separate from it. Her listening to the heartbeat can be read as her asking for permission to consume, rather than simply assuming she can do so. To truly understand her behavior here, though, we need to remember how Hushpuppy functions as a narrator and testifier, one that is also constructing her narrative from those around her. Earlier in the film, Hushpuppy is at school, and her teacher explains to the students that, “Every animal is made out of meat. I’m meat. Y’all ass is meat. Everything is part of the buffet of the universe” (*Beasts*). Hushpuppy’s listening to the leaf of the tree before she eats it shows an understanding that, in the grand scheme of nature, people can try all they want to think they are better than the rest of nature, but at the end of the day we are all bags of meat just like every other animal is. In thinking of this, and linking it metaphorically to Katrina and its cultural politics, the film is optimistic about what can be accomplished through reconnections, and the dangers of remaining entirely separate.

This is where her father’s “broken” heart comes in to play as it helps the viewer understand disconnection and separation from space and nature, which includes both physical, environmental, and social embodiments. In order to fully understand how her father’s heart represents this idea, it is important to understand how Hushpuppy, through



the film-as-testimony, mediates her responsibility for it, and how it links closely to her feelings of responsibility for all creatures. The first time the audience sees Wink's health condition comes after he arrives back home after being gone for an unspecified period of time, during which Hushpuppy was left to fend for herself. The fact that the audience is uncertain of how long Wink was actually gone for is part of its pantemporality, as time is cloudy and uncertain as a result. When Wink comes back, he is seen wearing a hospital gown, and then we get a close-up shot of his wrist with a hospital bracelet on. Again, this is mediated through Hushpuppy, whose response and dialogue contrast with what the audience sees. Hushpuppy comments on the fact that he's wearing a dress and a bracelet, but seems unaware of what those objects actually mean for her father, or for her. Not long after Wink returns home, we see Hushpuppy cooking in her home-space<sup>13</sup> as her father calls her for "Feed up time." Instead of turning the burner off, she cranks up the flame and ends up setting that home-space on fire. This is the moment that she runs into the cardboard box and starts making her cave paintings for the scientists in the future. Wink storms into Hushpuppy's home-space, which the audience recognizes as him trying to get her out of the fire, but Hushpuppy is afraid of punishment so she flees. This again reinforces Hushpuppy as a testifier out of time, for even as she relates deep truths, we are also reminded that she is still a child. After Wink catches up to her, Hushpuppy yells at him, "I hope you die, and after you die I'll go to your grave and eat birthday cake all by myself!" (*Beasts*). She then punches Wink right on the chest. This thump is the strongest noise linked diegetically to her father's heart in the entire film, and it is immediately followed by the first clap of thunder in the film. As the thunder continues to rumble and

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<sup>13</sup> As mentioned above, Hushpuppy and Wink live on the same plot of land, but each have their own separate trailer in which they typically live and sleep.

grow, the film immediately cuts to a shot of a glacier crumbling, the glacier earlier linked to the aurochs frozen inside. Wink then collapses, and the next scene is of Hushpuppy standing at the edge of the water, shouting, “Mama, I think I broke something!” (*Beasts*). In this moment, through these links of sound and images cut together in this sequence, Hushpuppy feels responsible for not only her father, but also for the larger environmental impacts that are occurring. The importance that she shouts this from the edge of the water will also be returned to later in the film and this chapter.

If her father’s behaviors, here represented through his “broken” heart, gives the audience a character who functions entirely on separation and rejection of outside influence, then Hushpuppy, in this moment, recognizes her role as savior. Much like his keeping Hushpuppy at a distance, both physically through their separate home-spaces and emotionally through his tough parenting, Wink believes that separation is crucial to his, and Hushpuppy’s survival. By keeping that which is outside at a distance, Wink believes he is at his strongest. Hushpuppy simultaneously accepts and rejects her father’s views, but ultimately grows beyond his desire for barriers as she recognizes how (re)connection is what is most necessary to make productive changes. She saw herself as part of the problem when she struck her father and that immediately linked to the coming storm, and through her experience throughout the film with others in her community, she also sees herself as the one who can address the problems associated with those disconnections. At one point in the film, after the Bathtub is discovered as a result of the levee being blown, its citizens are rounded up and taken to a hospital/emergency medical area and Wink is given proper medical treatment. The earlier scene where Wink arrives back at their home in nothing but a hospital gown complements this scene. The implication in both being

that other people helping him, even doctors, is seen as a sign of weakness, so he must return to his own space and re-distance himself. He seems to be so unwilling to be part of the rest of the world that it is directly, and adversely, affecting his health. Wink cannot see himself as connected to others, and that eventually leads to his death. I will return to this idea later in the chapter, particularly in thinking about separation as being forced upon others, when I talk about the blowing of the levees, as well as how this idea of disconnect figures in with my earlier discussion of the Bathtub as a community framed as “out of place.” For my current purposes, however, Wink represents the ways that separation and disconnect, whether willing or forced, has damaging effects on those who separate as well as the space and community around them.

Hushpuppy reminds the viewer that, “The entire universe depends on everything fitting together just right. If you can fix the broken piece, everything can go right back” (*Beasts*). While it could certainly be argued that the first part of this statement is problematic, in that it implies everything, or everyone, has their rightful place, I think that in the context of *Beasts* it is not as simple as that. Because of the ways that the film wants us to think about the ways that people disconnect from nature and each other, I would argue that her statement is closer in line with her teacher’s earlier comment about everyone being meat, and Hushpuppy’s recognition of her place in a connected environment. Instead, Hushpuppy here seems to be pointing us towards an understanding of how we do not fit together, because problematic hegemonic ideology works to separate us. In the film, I would argue, her father’s heart, damaged and broken and all that it represents within the film, is that which needs to be fixed. It can only be fixed if Wink allows himself to reconnect to that which he has been separated from, and since he fails

to do so it ultimately costs him his life. What that broken piece actually is in relation to what was revealed during Katrina is not as simple to pin down. From race to environment to spatial exploitation, Katrina revealed many broken pieces in culture and society. As I will show, my concept of the pantemporal event-space helps situate these seemingly disparate pieces into a unified problem that stems from disconnection and unawareness of each problem as they occur over long time spans.

As I explained in the Introduction, often times particular issues are not as prevalent in the cultural discourse because many do not see the changes happening, because they happen over long stretches of time. Humans have an easy time experiencing weather on a day-to-day basis, but our bodies cannot really experience the concept of climate change/global warming in the same way. Add to this our twenty-four-hour news cycle with an emphasis on Disaster of the Day/Week-type stories, and we are left with an experience that is inherently disjointed and disparate, leaving us unsure of what “piece” is broken and needing fixed. One day it is terrorism, the next day it is global warming, and the day after that it is police brutality, and so on. With so many varied, sometimes competing, concerns, addressing what needs to be addressed can be difficult to sift through. With pantemporal event-spaces, such as Hurricane Katrina, and even more so through the stories and narratives that are retelling that event, the convergence of these disconnected pieces are seen as not-so-disconnected after all.

Ross Gelbspan, in his essay “Nature Fights Back” argues that discussions about the government’s response in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina often distracted us from conversations about climate change. Gelbspan writes,

The initial reactions following the storm recalled the typical scrambling of trauma victims: a frantic focus on other issues...so people could avoid the central message. For days, the media was full of criticisms of the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) slow reactions, the president's initial lack of urgency, and the failure of Louisiana authorities to provide proper evacuation planning. All of this was a panicky effort to avoid confronting one of Katrina's underlying messages: the truly awesome power of inflamed nature. (15)

Certainly those conversations about FEMA, President Bush, and evacuation were important and played their role in the storm's higher-than-usual devastation. And many scholars have pointed out the ways that Hurricane Katrina was not a completely natural disaster.<sup>14</sup> However, to completely ignore the role that global warming played in Hurricane Katrina growing more and more powerful would be to ignore one of the key components of a pantemporal event-space. It is not simply about sociological time converging. Nor is it about geological/natural time converging. Rather, it is the convergence of all of those temporalities at once—social into natural, natural into social—that is crucial to understanding disaster events like Hurricane Katrina. Simply focusing on the human-caused elements after the storm does not also consider the human-caused elements of global warming as well.

In *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, Hushpuppy understands this necessity of dual-focus, of remembering to think about both social and environmental concerns together. One of these issues, one that is directly related to climate change *and* to the safety and protection of New Orleans and its citizens, is the dwindling wetlands. These wetlands,

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<sup>14</sup> See *There is No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster: Race, Class, and Hurricane Katrina*, eds. Chester Hartman and Gregory D. Squires, which includes essays from which I cite throughout this dissertation.

just off the coast in the Gulf of Mexico, serve as a natural barrier to hurricanes by slowing them down and weakening them before they can make landfall. New Orleans is slowly disappearing into the Gulf of Mexico. In fact, it has been for some time and will continue to do so, albeit far more aggressively should current behaviors and perceptions of the area not be corrected. As Sara Shipley Hiles explains, “The process is natural, but human actions have made it far worse. Levees, oil and gas extraction, and shipping canals—all products of man’s attempt to control nature—are partly to blame” (7-8). In the past the Mississippi River would bring sediment down to the Louisiana coast, depositing and slowly creating the delta over time. This delta—and the marshlands that are a part of it—is a natural barrier for hurricanes, slowing them down and weakening them before they move farther inland. With the construction of levees, pipelines, and canals this process of depositing sediment has slowed drastically, because they instead send “the river’s land-building sediment streaming over the edge of the continental shelf into the deep water of the Gulf of Mexico” (Hiles 9). New Orleans is built on a carefully balanced scale, one in which the shift towards further disaster is being tipped in disaster’s favor. The city, being below sea level, relies on the levees to keep it protected. But these levees are also destroying the one natural barrier that was already there, the wetlands.

*Beasts* sets up this connection very early in the film, in an establishing shot of the Bathtub. A little over three minutes into the film, Hushpuppy and her father float gently over the water in their truck-bed raft, and the audience sees nothing but water in the foreground and the distance, save for a single line of a breakwall dividing the screen. Interestingly in this shot, Wink is seated in the boat, so his head is underneath this dividing line, while Hushpuppy stands with her head directly over it. This immediately

reinforces her position as someone who can straddle multiple perspectives, both temporally and socially, as she serves as testifying narrator. Rather than situating her on one side or the other, she is seen as floating between.

The very next thing the audience sees is a reverse shot from behind the boat, and rather than the boat taking up the majority of the screen, it is now overwhelmed by smokestacks, refineries, and a flat landscape of industry and destruction. In giving us this establishing shot, it not only situates the Bathtub in an environment that is of particular concern to environmental justice scholars, it also links the film thematically to what Hiles referred to as “man’s attempt to control nature.” The Bathtub is a community directly and adversely affected by these attempts, both locally and globally, immediately and over longer durations, whether having to deal with pollution, run-off, lower property value, or access to basic services on a daily basis, or dealing with the increasingly adverse effects of hurricanes over time.

This shifting of the scales from natural defenses to the narcissistic view that humans can fix the problem themselves, I would argue, is certainly endemic to a human-nature ideological relationship. As Hiles mentioned above, these are products of an attempt to control nature, to keep it separate from humans. Attempts such as these, however, rely on a belief that—once controlled—nature will behave as some wish it to. Stacy Alaimo, and her work with transcorporeality, tries to help us understand and reconcile this disconnect. Returning to a discussion from the Introduction, authors Astrida Neimanis and Rachel Loewen Walker use Alaimo’s work to move the concept of transcorporeality into a mode for understanding climate change and our experiences of it. They argue,

To bring climate change home, in this context, entails reconfiguring our spatial and temporal relations to the weather-world and cultivating an imaginary where our bodies are makers, transfer points, and sensors of the “climate change” from which we might otherwise feel too distant, or that may seem to us too abstract to get a bodily grip on. We propose that if we can reimagine “climate change” and the fleshy, damp immediacy of our own embodied existences as intimately imbricated, and begin to understand that the weather and the climate are not phenomena “in” which we live at all—where climate would be some natural backdrop to our separate human dramas—but are rather of us, in us, through us, we might ignite the intensity that Colebrook calls for. (Neimanis and Walker 559)

Colebrook’s intensity, for Neimanis and Walker, is, simply, the point in which someone is moved into action, the point that they stop contemplating what might be done and start solving the issues. The combination of separation from nature and the belief that it can be controlled creates a vicious cycle, in which the solutions to the problem are not an actual solution (like replenishing the marshlands), but simply another quick-fix band-aid that continually relies on the apparent ability to control, because nature has been placed in a subjugated position.

Reconnecting with nature, and understanding that we humans are, in fact, part of nature, can help us understand and enact the best solutions to global warming and climate change, because they will benefit both nature and ourselves (because we are part of nature). Ross Gelbspan, in “Nature Fights Back,” from *What Lies Beneath: Katrina, Race, and the State of the Nation* writes, “I suspect Hurricane Katrina dealt a severe blow to the illusion among larger segments of the American public that we are somehow



separate from and independent of nature” (24). It is through reconnection to nature, among other things some have separated themselves from, that someone can see how their choices have long lasting impacts to the environment, to each other, and to the future. Thinking is not focused on the immediate temporality, but also functions pantemporally, to consider the past, present, *and the future* in decision-making. One of the things that I love most about the scene in which Hushpuppy draws her story on the cardboard box is how in that single scene there are three temporalities of storytelling occurring, overlapped between her and the audience. The first is how her use of “cave drawings” ties her testimony to the past, or how she utilizes the past to make sense of *her* present. Second, the audience is witnessing a testimony as it occurs in their present; in other words, they watch the film right now, but also understand that this is something that has, in some ways, already happened and can occur again. Finally, the film, and Post-Katrina literature more generally, asks us as viewers to think about how we might use these texts to improve the future, to break these cycles of exploitation of nature and humans. And of course, Hushpuppy repeats herself on this point, when she needs her story to be told for the future. This trifecta of temporalities closely, but not perfectly, align with Laub’s three levels of witnessing: “the level of being a witness to oneself within the experience; the level of being a witness to the testimonies of others; and the level of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself” (Felman and Laub 75).

As discussed briefly above, another way that *Beasts of the Southern Wild* represents the pantemporality of global warming/climate change is through the appearance of the aurochs throughout the movie. The aurochs are, in some ways, the “beasts” of the title, though, as I argued, not the only beasts. After hearing her teacher

explain the history of the aurochs during a lesson about global warming, Hushpuppy becomes connected to the aurochs that appear throughout the film. The first time the viewer sees the aurochs they are frozen in glaciers, in what the viewer can assume to be icecaps found at one of the poles. This scene, in which images of huge sheaths of ice melting off of the glaciers is shown, come immediately after the audience hears her teacher explain, “Any day now, fabric of the universe is coming unraveled. Ice caps gonna melt, water’s gonna rise, and everything south of the levee is going under” (*Beasts*). These lines are spoken over a close-up of a map, which shows the levee drawn in dotted lines with an island below, identified as “The Bathtub” written in black with an arrow pointing to it. As Miss Bathsheeba finishes her speech, the audience next gets a close up of Hushpuppy’s face, which immediately cuts to a photograph of a large glacier with “THE SOUTH POLE” as its heading. The camera slowly pans in closer and closer to this photo, as Hushpuppy narrates, “Way back in the day, the aurochs was king of the world” (*Beasts*). The next shot is of an auroch frozen in ice, as Hushpuppy continues, “If it wasn’t for the giant snowballs and the iced [sic] age, I wouldn’t be Hushpuppy. I’d just be breakfast” (*Beasts*). Again, this comes right after her teacher was discussing the fact that everyone is meat, so Hushpuppy mediates this understanding through her relationship to the aurochs. By utilizing Hushpuppy’s testimonial mediation (Laub’s second level of witnessing) the viewer is directed towards a larger, societal implication of what she is testifying to (Laub’s third level).

As discussed earlier, coinciding with Hushpuppy striking her father’s chest, thunder roars and the glacier collapses into the ocean. The viewer can then see aurochs frozen inside of large blocks of ice as they begin to float away. Over the course of the

film, the block of ice trapping the aurochs continues to melt and eventually the beasts are freed. This first culminates in a scene in which the aurochs make landfall just as the storm does. In this scene, Hushpuppy witnesses her father “fight” the storm, when he goes outside to show her there is nothing to be afraid of by firing a shotgun at the storm and screaming at it. This mirrors one of Hushpuppy’s final moments in the film, when she herself faces down with the aurochs, stopping and calming them. Prior to this, the film is filled with the sounds of the storm, as rain crashes into their home, and the wind howls, and thunder crashes nearby and in the distance. These sounds slowly begin to blend and die out as the sounds of the aurochs thunderous steps and growls take over.

The next instance we get of the destructive power of the aurochs comes when Hushpuppy explains it was, “Two weeks later [and] everything started to die” (*Beasts*). Just before this, right after the storm had hit and flooded the Bathtub, we see scene after scene of the community coming together to rebuild and help each other, while the upbeat, thematic music from the opening of the film plays over it. There are shots of a plant full of peppers, and Hushpuppy talks about having plenty of animals to eat until the water goes down. Her teacher then says, “That’s the most important thing I can teach you all. You gotta take of people smaller and sweeter than you all” (*Beasts*). This is perhaps the film’s most overt statement of intent, particularly in the frames of my arguments, but the mood quickly shifts as the next scene sees Hushpuppy watching her father sleep, while a very faint and irregular heartbeat can be heard. This diegetic heartbeat begins to swell in volume, and the film cuts to a shot of a cityscape. As the camera pans through the town, the screen begins to shake, until the aurochs burst through and trample through the town, destroying it. It is unclear what town this is supposed to be, but it should not be read as

the Bathtub, because it is both dry, and the aurochs do not arrive at the Bathtub until the end of the film. After they trample through, the film cuts to Hushpuppy on a boat with her father, giving us the quote at the beginning of this paragraph. This links the storm's (aurochs') destructiveness to Katrina, primarily because of the ways that the storm itself certainly caused damage, but there were aftershock effects that were equally as destructive and catastrophic.

Later in the film, Hushpuppy is with her father, again watching him sleep. She (and the audience) get their first look at Wink's scarred and bruised chest, which Hushpuppy believes is her fault, but which the audience understands is not entirely hers. Hushpuppy sits on a step, looks out upon the same water as earlier, and speaking to flashing light in the distance says, "Mama, is that you? I've broken everything" (*Beasts*). The film immediately cuts to a shot of the aurochs, now free and moving as a pack. The continually framing of this as after the storm, again, keeps this within the Katrina narrative. As many of us know, it was not just the storm itself that was the disaster, but the lasting effects of it as well. By showing the aurochs continuing to exist, even after the storm has hit diegetically, the film allows the aurochs to continue to visually and physically represent Katrina.

This use of the aurochs to represent both climate change and a large-scale weather event is one way that *Beasts of the Southern Wild* uses narrative and film techniques to embody the pantemporality of Hurricane Katrina experience and the concept of weathering explored in the Introduction and argued by Neimanis and Walker. *Beasts*, I would argue, helps us understand how we can "cultivate a sensibility that attunes us not only to the 'now' of the weather, but toward ourselves and the world as weather bodies,

mutually caught up in the whirlwind of a weather-world, in the thickness of climate-time” (Neimanis and Walker 561). By visually representing climate change (the icecaps melting) and then using practical effects to let the viewer watch a ferocious force approaching The Bathtub, the film is able to capture that pantemporality of long-term climate change with short-term weather experience into a metaphorical moment. Over the next few paragraphs, I will look at why it is so difficult for humans to understand long-term processes, even in relation to short-term ones, but then explain why literature, and *Beasts* in particular, is a vital tool for doing so.

Elizabeth Kolbert partially describes why humans have such a hard time experiencing climatological time in her essay, “A Song of Ice.” In it, she writes about “global warming’s backloaded temporality [which] makes all the warnings—from scientists, government agencies, and especially journalists—seem hysterical” (113). This backloaded temporality is what makes it so difficult to understand the impacts that people have on the environment, because those impacts are often felt long after the fact. What someone does today might not be visible for decades. Kolbert explains, “In effect, we are living in the climate of the past, but we’ve already determined the climate’s future... It’s likely that the “floodgates” are already open, and that large sections of Greenland and Antarctica are fated to melt. It’s just the ice in front of us that’s still frozen (113). As a result of this temporal disconnect between what we see and what has caused it, especially because our minds are machines that thrive on direct cause and effect, it becomes easier and easier for someone to discount climate change and humanity’s role in it. It is also what makes those people so reluctant to do things for the future; they are, in some instances, “waiting to see what happens,” so to speak. Confronting the reality of

climate change, just like being confronted with one's own privilege, can be scary and can cause negative reactions and doubling down. So either people cannot understand that what they are looking at is a direct result of human actions (because those actions occurred much longer ago than our brains can make sense of in real time), or they are reluctant to look to, or think about, the future with what humans are currently doing. Either way, they become stuck in one temporality, with little regard for confronting the past or working towards a better future, all because of an inability to experience time on longer scales.

This is what literature allows us to do, though. As explained in the Introduction and throughout this chapter, one of Post-Katrina literature's key functions is to represent the pantemporality of the storm. Because Hurricane Katrina was, as I have argued, a pantemporal event-space, it provided us a unique opportunity to experience these different temporalities that we are usually unaware of, or cannot fathom. Yet the storm has long passed us by, so continuing to experience the pantemporality can only be done through other means, which is what Post-Katrina literature gives. By replicating the pantemporal event-space, Post-Katrina literature allows to re-experience that convergence and think towards the past and future from the present. *Beasts* does this by giving the viewer something perceivable as global warming/climate change through the aurochs. In allowing the viewer to visually see something that is typically unseen, the film concretizes those longer-term natural cycles that we cannot experience until decades later. This is something that film itself, I believe, is well suited for, as it does not require the reader to construct the image in their own minds the way a novel or poem might. It is right there as clear as day, with little doubt of what these aurochs represent.

Because climate change is something that, as has been argued, is not easily experienced by humans in their day-to-day lives, as it occurs slowly over decades, something is needed to call our attention to it. For the real world event of Hurricane Katrina, the storm itself was one such caller. In the world of this film, Hushpuppy and the audience see the aurochs released and moving with strength and ferocity towards The Bathtub. Having something that exists in climatological time (global warming and its impact on the strength of storms) represented and seen in real time (the aurochs thundering towards the Bathtub) gives us the experience of weathering laid out by Neimanis and Walker, as it forces us to see ourselves as existing within the same time as weather-time. No longer are we stuck just in the present, but our brains can now understand the close interplay between past, present, and future that Kolbert discussed, and in doing so allows us to reframe our relationship to and behavior towards the environment.

At the end of the film, Hushpuppy stares down the aurochs as they arrive at the edge of the Bathtub, and the viewer is directly confronted with this notion of weathering. As she is walking, the aurochs trail behind her, and the film cuts between this shot, and a shot of Wink looking concerned or worried. In this moment, the audience might wonder if he finally sees the aurochs too, if the aurochs were not simply part of Hushpuppy's imagination. Hushpuppy's face becomes increasingly defiant and strong, until she finally turns around to face the aurochs, mirroring her father's earlier behavior when he "fought" the actual storm. The film cuts to a shot of Hushpuppy and a single aurochs both in profile, with Hushpuppy dwarfed in size. The aurochs then all lay down in front of Hushpuppy, after which she says to them, with a slight smile, "You're my friend, kind of."

I gotta take care of mine” (*Beasts*). As Hushpuppy turns to look at the aurochs—at climate change—she is choosing to address it. Since the film has given us a visual representation of it, and since it has framed the narrative for us through Hushpuppy, the viewer too is shown what happens when they choose to confront the issue. By stopping to actually look, to stare in the face of what global warming is, what human’s impacts on it are, and what people can or cannot do about addressing it forces people to understand their relationship to nature. The physical and temporal connection to nature is revealed. People see how past behaviors and present actions will influence the future of nature and ourselves in that single moment, and in doing so, they can course correct for the future. Once Hushpuppy acknowledged the aurochs, they turned and walked away. The metaphorical representation of climate change receded.

Beyond this, I would argue, these reconnections made through weathering move us towards helping each other as well. After all, Hushpuppy not only acknowledged climate change, but she also understood that she has a duty to care for others around her as well, when she said, “I gotta take care of mine.” Environmental justice, as a reminder, is not simply concerned with how humans impact the environment, but also with how those impacts often affect particular communities or people more adversely than others. A key concern of contemporary environmental justice criticism is how to get communities that have historically been negatively affected to care about these larger, more global issues. Just like those in the Bathtub, or those in the Pit in Jesmyn Ward’s novel *Salvage the Bones* that I will look at in the next chapter, have more to worry about on a day-to-day basis even without a hurricane, people in poor communities of color everywhere are similarly faced with more immediate issues. The film understands that



the issue of climate change is important, and it foregrounds that in a way that allows us to experience it as viewers through Hushpuppy.

However, when Hushpuppy acknowledges that the aurochs are her friend, “kind of,” and that she has to also take care of her own community, the film situates this understanding in weathering even more firmly, particularly how it asks us how to think about how relationships between bodies and the environment differ between groups and communities. Neimanis and Walker write,

In fact, it is in explicit recognition of the ways in which bodies are differently situated in relation to climate change that we call for greater attention to our own weathering. If climate change is an abstract notion, this is closely bound to a privileged Western life that is committed to keeping the weather and its exigencies *out* (561).

In linking weathering to privilege in this way, weathering constructs itself as a tool of thinking about reconnection to space and each other as a way to deconstruct privilege and exploitative ideologies. No longer is it about keeping things out, but bringing them in and connecting to them. For too long, underprivileged communities are left out of discussions of how best to address climate change. Hushpuppy’s thoughts as she faces down the aurochs calls out those viewers who, perhaps, have used privilege to ignore warnings of climate change and/or calls for social justice, or who have utilized privilege to keep people out of those discussions. Hushpuppy wants to be a person who helps address climate change, but she does so by saying, in a way, “You have to include us as well.” Weathering is about bringing all voices into the fold, into a dialogue of the past, present, and future, between nature and culture.

*Beasts* shows us this concept of past-present-future productive critical engagement in one way by having the characters decide to blow up the levees that have created separation between the Bathtub and the surrounding communities. Hushpuppy, by actually pushing the button, is literally forcing human-made barriers to be ripped apart in an attempt to reconnect the communities separated by them. Of course, like many of Hushpuppy's actions, the result is not clear-cut. Hushpuppy narrates, "It didn't matter that the water was gone" (*Beasts*). The Bathtub was still left destroyed after the water receded. The history of that space is still tied to the present circumstances and the future of reconstruction. While their actions were based in a desire to reconnect, the way that their space was previously crafted for them still hindered their ability to reconstruct and move on. This calls the viewers attention to the ways that thinking about the film pantemporally helps us understand why disconnection is harmful, particularly the longer it goes unchecked. The Bathtub was forced into separation for so long that simply reconnecting the community to other areas is not enough to fix the divide. There are still economic and social divides that exist, partially because of the Bathtub wanting them to remain so. After the levees are blown, the isolated citizens in the Bathtub are quickly rounded up and taken to a hospital and aid station against their will. Even by physically reconnecting the communities by blowing the levee, those who dwell in the Bathtub do not want to be part of the social community surrounding them.

This might seem to problematize my reading of the film, and other critics have pointed out the issues with the film presenting the rejection of post-storm aid in this way. However, I would argue that their rejection of medicine and help speaks to the ways that communities forced into outsider status for as long as the Bathtub has become self-

fulfilling prophecies in some ways. If people are seen and labeled as less than human for as long as the Bathtub has, at a certain point they might begin to believe it. This certainly was true for the authors of many of the post-Katrina testimonies that I discussed in the Introduction with regards to how people of color were not surprised by the revelations of the storm, compared to white perceptions. Reconnection is not a simple process and can certainly be messy and uncomfortable, particularly if one does not consider the past, present, and future tied into that solution. Quick fixes to complex solutions can often carry unknown side effects. Hushpuppy, reacting as a young child without much understanding of those complexities, creates a solution that has the right intentions but the wrong approach. It is impulsive and serves as a warning to the viewer about how not to think about solutions, particularly when thinking about them atemporally without regard for how the present can and might impact the future.

As the film closes, Hushpuppy and the community gather for a funeral for Wink. He is placed in the makeshift raft, set on fire, and then pushed into the water, like a Viking funeral might do. As his burning body floats away, Hushpuppy sums up this idea of weathering and reconnection perfectly, while also demonstrating her own awareness of her previous behaviors and how they have impacted the present, and might continue to do so. Hushpuppy says,

When it all goes quiet behind my eyes, I see everything that made me flying around in invisible pieces. When I look too hard it goes away. And when it all goes quiet, I see they are right here. I see that I'm a little piece of a big, big universe, and that makes things right. When I die, the scientists of the future,

they're gonna find it all. They're gonna know. Once there was a Hushpuppy, and she lived with her daddy in the Bathtub. (*Beasts*)

As these last few lines are spoken in the voiceover, the film cuts to Hushpuppy leading the members of the Bathtub as they walk along the road/breakwall that connects the island to the mainland. She finally understands the flaws in her father's thinking that kept them disconnected for so long, and that that reconnection is the best way to ensure their survival, but also that it is vital for the survival against climate change as well. This shot of the community walking is also particularly interesting for how it is framed, matching in some ways the earlier shot of Hushpuppy's head bridging between divides. The road/breakwall that they walk down divides the screen down the center. On the left, are some stones which keep the water from touching the road, and on the right, the water rushes up and flows over the road, covering it. As the camera pulls away from the group, the water flows less and less, which gives the impression that it is this group which is perhaps flooding the road as they pass, covering it and removing the barrier.

Reconnection, Hushpuppy and the viewer now understands, takes a community and involves not only reconnecting, but also destroying the barriers that caused the disconnect in the first place. With her as their six-year old leader, it also asks the viewer to bear in mind the future as they consider these reconnections and changes, and because of how her voice and perception have been our gateway throughout the film, it also asks them to consider those things pantemporally. Even though Hushpuppy is moving beyond the Bathtub towards the future, her comments about what she sees when she closes her eyes also show her being reflective of the past. We must look to the past, and consider how it

impacts us in the present, so that we can make the necessary changes to ensure that those impacts do not continue to affect the future as well.

### **Isolated Communities and Place Hierarchy**

This section of the chapter will look more closely at how *Beasts of the Southern Wild* provides a deeper social commentary on particular social and environmental justice issues that arose in the aftermath of Katrina. As such, while I do certainly utilize the film throughout this section, my primary concerns are these social and environmental justice issues, and so this will certainly read more sociological than as a close reading of the film. The Bathtub community takes its name for several reasons: quite literally, it is described as being bowl shaped; it sits below a levee that is designed to keep water out of other communities by keeping rain water in the Bathtub during hurricanes and storms; and its residents are poor citizens, many of whom are people of color, which connects with many negative perceptions of New Orleans' residents, and the physical communities themselves, as "unclean" or undeserving of assistance or saving that arose during Hurricane Katrina. Rachel A. Woldoff and Brian J. Gerber discuss this concept as "place hierarchy" in their essay "Protect or Neglect? Social Structure, Decision Making, and the Risk of Living in African American Places in New Orleans." They write that, to understand place hierarchy, we need to understand the two ways that it functions and thrives: "(1) some neighborhoods are better places to live than others; (2) place stratification is not random, but patterned" (173). Woldoff and Gerber go on to explain what makes a place to live "good," at least insofar as most people would perceive that place to be so: solid infrastructure, low crime, access to education, etc. Because New Orleans does not meet many of these criteria, those perceptions of the city, and its

residents by extension, the city was undeserving of rescue or assistance. Or it was “their fault” for living there in the first place, regardless of how little influence citizens, particularly poor citizens, have in both selecting where to live and/or shaping that space. Hushpuppy herself makes mention of the levee that was constructed to separate the Bathtub from the Dry Side: “Daddy says, up above the levee, on the dry side, they’re afraid of the water like a bunch of babies. They built the wall that cuts us off” (*Beasts*). The citizens of the Bathtub did not construct the levee for their own safety. Quite the opposite, in fact, as the levee in *Beasts of the Southern Wild* was constructed to flood the Bathtub to protect the surrounding communities. Because the Dry Side is afraid of water, and because they have the means and privilege to shape their own space as well as the spaces of others, they are able to establish and isolate a community with little regard for its safety, or the safety of its inhabitants. I will return to the metaphor of the levee later in this chapter, as I discuss the pantemporal context of the levees in the historical memory and shaping of identity of citizens of New Orleans and the characters of *Beasts of the Southern Wild*.

The concept of socially-agreed-upon “goodness,” and the way it affects how people deserve help and how that help is often determined by outside forces, can also be seen in Allison M. Cotton’s “Stipulations: A Typology of Citizenship in the United States After Katrina,” where she writes about various citizen typologies in the United States, which are defined by, and vary in, both their self-sufficiency and in the ways that they are perceived by others, with those perceptions being based on the particular group’s conformity to the same ideals as other citizens. In short, the more a community lives the

life of “normalcy,” as determined by the ideological hegemony, the more that community is seen as deserving of aid:

According to the citizenship typology . . . , some people in the United States deserve to be rescued from the mud of their lives while others simply deserve to wade in it. That is an unflattering picture to paint of the thousands of Americans who neither caused the hurricane nor wished for it to happen, but that is a much more advantageous view of the horrible consequences brought on by Hurricane Katrina than the view from the conscience of those who had the power to help or to prevent the level of devastation that occurred, but did not. (169)

When considering some critic’s responses to *Beasts* in this context as well, the parallels are alarming. As I explained earlier, many wrote negatively about how the characters in the film behaved towards outsiders. In giving us a community that is difficult to categorize, *Beasts* asks us to consider what “normal” means, and calls attention to how individuals reacted similarly to citizens of New Orleans Post-Katrina. Dickel and Kindinger continue:

Hurricane Katrina did not only expose capitalist ideologies, racial segregation, poverty, and governmental mismanagement, it also exposed the fragility of belonging, citizenship, and home. The early media coverage that labeled the residents of New Orleans...who had to leave their homes...“refugees” has been widely criticized as deceptive and reassertive of the segregation and disenfranchisement many African Americans were exposed to before, during and after the storm... It helped construct them as non-citizens of the United States, a foreign body in their own homes. (11)

Whether through people's perceptions of New Orleans and Gulf Coast citizens as being different-minded—why would anyone choose to live there?—or because of the media portrayal of those survivors during the storm as “looters” or “refugees,” it quickly became clear that the communities most harshly affected by Katrina were seen as the least deserving of help, simply because they were framed as outsiders, and so they were required to rebuild and reconstruct for themselves in many instances.

Ironically, in *Beasts* when the audience is given a self-sustaining, self-supporting community in the Bathtub, they are still framed as outsiders. In the Bathtub, the community continually behaves and acts in a manner that seems bizarre or “wrong” from a hegemonic perspective. From how Wink is raising Hushpuppy to the community's resistance towards the aid that is given to (forced upon?) them, the film asks the viewer to think about how the conceptions of “outsiders” is framed. This is not to say that much of the behavior in the Bathtub is not problematic on some level. Wink's parenting certainly flies in the face of modern child psychology, and one could make the argument that the education that the children are receiving is not quite meeting the standards of a public education elsewhere. I would argue, though, that this is the point. The film needs to be jarring in how it portrays outsiders, so that the audience can more effectively establish how difference is crafted, and how that crafting negatively affects those groups when it comes to aid and assistance. Glenn Jellenik discusses how *Beasts* for him indicates a shift from first-wave Post-Katrina texts into a second wave. He writes of how these second-wave Katrina texts “represent a shift away from using the Katrina narrative as a cultural mirror and towards using such texts as windows” (233). As I will discuss more in this chapter, and in the next, I think he is creating binaries where there need not be any. In



other words, a text such as *Beasts* can function as a highly reflective window, one in which we can both “peel back the skin and reveal America’s diseased socio-economic underbelly and toward texts that use the storm as an invitation to construct...artifacts that can record and preserve cultures” (233). Many can see themselves in what is reflected through the text, and how it calls out problematic behaviors. Those viewers can also see through the text and see others, and start to understand their cultures, behaviors, and the issues facing them.

*Beasts* constructs this reflective window partially through the spatial isolation of the Bathtub. It is an island, surrounded by natural barriers, but it is also separated by the levee that is destroyed in the film. Earlier in this chapter, I discussed the ways that Ross Gelbspan argued that conversations about responses to Katrina were often redirected away from environmental concerns. Similarly, we can look at how issues about space and identity can be deflected onto issues with the place itself by returning to Timothy Cresswell and his work in *In Place, Out of Place*. In doing so we can see how these sociospatial framings of identity, particularly in the ways that they reinforce separation of us/them, are strengthened in the aftermath of events like Hurricane Katrina in the moments that we attempt to interpret and make sense of what occurred. Cresswell writes, “The apparently commonsensical notion of ‘out-of-place’ plays a clear role in the interpretations of particular events. In many instances these interpretations have intensely political implications” (7). When individuals use those interpretations of space to make arguments that are based in ideology or politics in order to undermine or exploit the “out-of-place” group, these individuals “use the taken-for-granted aspects of place to turn attention away from a social problem (homelessness, racism) and reframe a question in

terms of the quality of a particular place” (Cresswell 8). After Katrina, these interpretations of space caused people to not only be left behind by delaying aid and access to infrastructure, among other things; it also allowed for capitalist political momentum to come in and make drastic changes to benefit those individuals at the expense of New Orleans’ citizens, such as those practices examined by Naomi Klein, which I will look at in more detail in the next section. For Cresswell, *where* something occurred has just as much impact as either who did it, or who it was done to. In the case of Katrina, the fact that much of the destruction occurred in New Orleans, with all of the cultural and racial perceptions of the city, is vitally important to understanding how and why the government and others responded the way that they did after the storm. Framing a space in this way allows people who are outside of the space to feel safe, because they are removed and separated from the negatives associated with it. Hurricane Katrina, as I have argued, was a transgressive event, one that revealed these separations and perceptions to us.

Cresswell’s idea is easily applied to both survivors of Hurricane Katrina and the characters in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, both of whom were forced into a community separated from the surrounding areas, literally and metaphorically, physically and socially. The literal and physical separations can occur through environmental constructions, both natural and human-made, and can also occur through policy and economic actions, such as either forcing particular groups to live in particular neighborhoods or ensuring that they are not welcome in other ones (which, perhaps, serves the same purpose). The metaphorical and social separations are a result of cultural differences, misunderstandings, ideologies, and other such framings that establish

particular groups as “outsiders.” Rather than framing the questions around notions of why they might be considered out-of-place in the first place and who determines that out-of-place-ness, their out-of-place identity precludes the event and instead informs the ways it is interpreted, and the blame for the event’s impact becomes theirs. The outside forces that have placed them in an out-of-place position are free to persist without questioning, remaining “commonsensical.” Because we can read Katrina as a transgressive political event, as outlined in the Introduction, the sleight-of-hand that Cresswell discusses is revealed as a result of the storm, and becomes a productively critical metaphor in the literary narratives that were written in its aftermath.

*Beasts of the Southern Wild* is exemplary of this. It uses this productive metaphor by shaping the citizens of the Bathtub as outsiders who embrace their outsider status. It seems odd to the viewer to see a community reject medical care and aid, particularly in the aftermath of a disaster, but by rejecting what is framed as “normal” those citizens are calling attention to the ways that their forced sociospatial identity was, in many ways, constructed for them. That they embrace it is seen as strange, but as Cresswell has explained, it is by recognizing what is strange that allows to see how and who framed it as such. As I have discussed, the film is full of representations of these strange behaviors, such as Wink and Hushpuppy living in separate trailers, the education that Hushpuppy gets, and even the Viking-like funeral for Wink at the end of the film. One scene in particular, however, best demonstrates this awareness and rejection of normalcy, of what is seen as proper. In this scene, Wink and Hushpuppy are hanging out at a post-storm celebration—“for the ones we never find, we make a funeral the Bathtub way”—in which everyone is eating crab (*Beasts*). A man, “Uncle John,” is shown giving Hushpuppy

instructions on how to eat crab, and he's showing her how to split the shell open to get the meat. This is a very proper, neat, and standard way to get at the meat. Additionally, this links with New Orleans' culture as well, with a more celebratory way to mourn standing in contrast to how most others treat death and mourning. Wink watches as Uncle John gives instructions to Hushpuppy, until finally he explodes and slams his fist on the table, shouting, "No, Hushpuppy! Beast it!" (*Beasts*). He then grabs the crab from her and begins tearing into it using only his hands. Wink throws another crab in front of Hushpuppy and tells her to show him she can do it, as he and everyone begin chanting "Beast it!" Hushpuppy eventually snaps into the crab and sucks out the meat, and then immediately stands up on the table and starts to flex her arm muscles. In this moment, Hushpuppy embodies this rejection of normalcy, as she embraces her "beasthood," again linking her to the aurochs, as I discussed earlier. Not only was rejecting the knife defiant, her standing on the table also calls attention to hers, and the Bathtub's, out of place behavior, because of where this moment takes place. They are in a public space, a bar or tavern of some sort, and certain behaviors are constructed and expected when in that space. The table itself is covered and piled end-to-end with crab carcasses and bits, also visually looking messy and filthy—like something normal spatial constructions would tell us to never eat off of. And Hushpuppy's decision to stand and flex on top of this filth, both serves as a defiance of expected behaviors ("Don't stand on the furniture," our parents always said) and an embrace of her community's own definition of normal, by allowing herself to be on the same level as that which is seen as filthy and finding strength in it.

## Testimony and Identity

Here we can return to the ways that, in the Introduction, I explored how survivors of Hurricane Katrina—citizens of New Orleans framed as not-belonging—used testimony to challenge the negative ways that they and their identities were framed and positioned. These testimonies allowed the survivors to refocus on the social problems that they were facing, and to fight the tendency of conversations to move away from those discussions. Testimonies, and by extension Post-Katrina literatures more generally, tend to focus on the identity of a place and its inhabitants, the kinds of things Cresswell describes as a “normative landscape.” This is “the way in which ideas about what is right, just, and appropriate are transmitted through space and place. Something may be appropriate here but not there” (Cresswell 8). When combined with Cotton’s typologies of citizenship, and the way that she emphasizes the role that conformity plays in the ability for someone to be considered a true citizen, we can see how the sociospatial identities of New Orleans’ citizens were doomed even before Katrina, because of the preconceptions of New Orleans as a place of debauchery, crime, and sin—all of which stand in stark contrast to conservative, hegemonic understandings “normal” or “moral” behavior. Considering Hurricane Katrina took place during a highly religious, conservative presidency, it is no surprise that the people most affected by the storm were those seen the least “normal” from the perspective of the government at the time. As shown above, the characters in *Beasts* continually and simultaneously embraced their own otherness while rejecting those who attempted to define them or reign in their behaviors. Even at the end of the film, as Hushpuppy leads her community towards a

reconnection, her defiant line of still needing to take care of her own leads the viewer to understand this reconnection as occurring on the Bathtub's terms.

In *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, Naomi Klein argues the ways that this behavior of stereotyping certain citizens, coupled with the chaotic turmoil that follows a disaster like Hurricane Katrina, can help exploitative governmental and capitalist policies get easily and quickly enacted. In the Introduction, Klein relates instances where people were quick to talk about the “cleanse” of sorts that Hurricane Katrina provided New Orleans. She discusses various responses that Republican officials and lobbyists had regarding Louisiana, and New Orleans specifically, after Katrina. All used some variation of “cleaning up,” of having a “clean sheet,” and “fresh starts,” to come in and make changes to a city that was seen as dirty and needing cleaning, through new housing developments, new school systems, and new legislation. Klein writes, “Hearing all the talk of “fresh starts” and “clean sheets,” you could almost forget the toxic stew of rubble, chemical outflows and human remains just down the highway” (4). New Orleans, to many individuals, was a city that was out of place in the United States, a space of filth and sin, where cultures clashed and mixed. For these, Hurricane Katrina was a cleansing disaster, a cleansing that happened at the expense of the majority of the poorer citizens of color, who were seen as unwanted, unbelonging, and undeserving of rescue, both in how they were framed before the storm and after it as well. The storm was also a moment in which, in these disaster capitalist minds, rights could be wronged and new, increasingly exploitative, actions and legislation could be enacted as a result. I will return to this idea in Chapter Four as I discuss the ways that *Treme* considers the complexities of reconstruction after Hurricane Katrina.

But for the current moment, I want to describe how this attitude is treated and deconstructed in *Beasts* by looking in detail at the moment in the film that aid arrives. Just before the scene in which aid workers come and force the citizens of the Bathtub, we get another look at the aurochs as one of their numbers is shown to die. As this occurs, Hushpuppy in voiceover states, “Strong animals got no mercy. They’re the type of animals that eat their own mamas and daddies” (*Beasts*). If, as I have shown, we are to link the aurochs to global warming, here the film asks us to also link that global warming to practices of environmental exploitation and destruction caused by capitalist agendas by showing animals who eat their own, whose behaviors demonstrate a willingness to exploit others for their own gain. As the aurochs continue to feed, their diegetic eating noises blend into the next scene as Hushpuppy and Wink are laying together and a helicopter can start to be heard overhead. This scene plays out with the aid workers kicking in the door to where the Bathtub residents were sleeping, and tackling them and removing them by force. Immediately, the film cuts to the “Open Arms Medical Center” that they have been taken to, and the camera moves through this space with uncertainty, mirroring the confused look on Hushpuppy’s face as she stares at the white ceiling with white lights. The space is so clean. Everything is white and bright and organized, standing in stark contrast to the cluttered, rusted spaces that the audience (and Hushpuppy) has known throughout the film so far. It is clear that this is a space that is designed to help, but the citizens of the Bathtub are reluctant to see it is such.

This complex spatial identity of The Bathtub’s citizens mirrors Melvin Dixon’s notions of spaces holding different meanings discussed in the Introduction. To remind, Dixon argues for the ways that place and space, particularly more natural spaces, often

have multiple, competing ideological connotations for people of color. The wilderness is seen as both a place to be afraid of and a location of deliverance. This connotation stems from a history that is just as complex as the connotation itself. In other words, Dixon would argue, nineteenth-century slaves used the wilderness as a location to escape, but it was also a place in which they were hunted, lynched, and abused. As a result of this historical experience, a form of this ideological connection to the wilderness is still prevalent in modern society, passed down from generation to generation. Speaking of the speech that Martin Luther King, Jr. gave the night before he was assassinated, Dixon writes of the ways that King embraced this generational experience: “Through the act and eloquence of his testimony, King must have jolted his listeners backward and forward in time: to the past of slavery and fugitive journeys to free territory, to the present struggle for civil liberties, and to a future of personal and group salvation” (1). This historical ideology becomes pantemporal in this way. Experiences of the past are rooted in the present. Historical experience and awareness is used in order to try and make sense of a world split in two, whether that split occurs through hegemonic ideology building or through a traumatic, rupturing event like Hurricane Katrina. Earlier in my analysis of the film, I discussed how Hushpuppy is continually framed in relation to dividing lines: at the beginning of the film, her head is framed so that it bridges the breakwall that divides the screen; she is the one who presses the button that blows the levee and allows the water to recede from the Bathtub; and at the end of the film, she leads her community over the road/breakwall to reconnect them. Hushpuppy is the bridge, both for her community within the narrative of the film (and visually throughout the film), but also serves as the link between the audience and her testimony. She is, as Christina Sharpe might argue, a



“girl from the archives of disaster” (51), bridging time and testimony, like many who testified after Katrina did.

As explained in the Introduction, one of the most interesting aspects of the testimonial narratives that were written after Hurricane Katrina was the myth that the levees were blown on purpose in order to salvage the nicer areas of New Orleans at the expense of the poorer neighborhoods. What is interesting in *Beasts of the Southern Wild* is how the film, in a way, flips this notion on its head. In *Beasts of the Southern Wild* citizens of The Bathtub, including Hush Puppy’s father, take it upon themselves to the blow the levee that keeps the water in their community after a Katrina-like storm comes in. Regardless of who is or is not destroying the levee, what is important to note is what a levee can represent, both in real spaces and in the imagined spaces of *Beasts*: separation, disconnection, and also protection or destruction, depending on perspective. This representation, like so many other themes and places related to Hurricane Katrina and its literatures, holds multiple, overlapping meanings. On the most basic level, the meaning is tied to the simple fact that the levees exist to separate human dwellings and communities from a large amount of water, whether a river, a lake, or a flood. On another level, the levees also create a separation between neighborhoods, with poorer residents on one side and more well-off residents on the other. And on a third level, perhaps the most metaphorical of the three, the levees exist to keep humanity separate from nature. Sure, this last separation is sometimes necessary to ensure the safety and survival of the people living near and around levees, but, as will be seen, the disconnect between humans and nature is one that must be addressed, if society is to get on a course correction in regards to climate change and global warming.

Jellenik discusses what he calls an inversion of the levees as a metaphor. This inversion occurs because the levee holds during the fictional storm in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, rather than bursting under the weight of Hurricane Katrina. Jellenik writes,

Where the established Katrina narrative is driven by issues of race, the breaching of the levees, and the failure of the government to intervene on behalf of and in aid of its citizens, *Beasts* systematically unwinds each of these issues: it constructs a post-racial Bathtub, positions the *holding* of the levee as that which occasioned the flood and thus the disaster, and codes the government's response as hostile not because it ignored the affected impoverished community but rather because it was an efficient yet absolutely unwanted invasion of the Bathtub. In the end, such overt inversions invite inspection of *Beasts* as a revision of the Katrina narrative. (230-31)

Jellenik's continues to explain how this analysis of *Beasts of the Southern Wild's* use of this inversion stems from his overall thesis that, during a "second wave" of post-Katrina literature, a larger shift or inversion also occurred, which I will examine more over the next few paragraphs.

While I do not completely disagree with Jellenik's arguments, I do take issue with a few aspects, but these are also aspects that can be addressed and rectified by examining the text through my concept of the pantemporal event-space. I will argue with and agree with some of Jellenik's ideas over the remainder of this chapter and into the next, because he also includes *Salvage the Bones* as a similarly inverted, second-wave Katrina text. His general argument about later post-Katrina texts, hinted at the in the above quote, is that

they shift away from the expected, established concerns of earlier texts and responses to Hurricane Katrina. He lays out what he feels are the three primary thematic elements addressed in first-wave Katrina texts: “poverty, racism, and government ineptitude (with regard to both the construction of the levees and the Katrina relief effort)” (226-27). These themes about Katrina, according to Jellenik and with which I would generally agree (though, I would most certainly add environmental concerns to the list), are what most people immediately conjure in their minds when the words “Hurricane Katrina” are spoken. Because of the vast and complex media coverage that dealt with poverty, race, and government failures in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast during and following the storm, that has become the established narrative. Jellenik claims that, while these second-wave Katrina texts still certainly contain these thematic elements, they are not driven by those themes as their primary goals. Rather, post-Katrina texts become more about “a larger and more universal loss of self and of home and of culture” (Jellenik 228). Where I begin to distance myself from Jellenik is through his reasoning that

*Beasts* becomes a story...about the struggle with the finite nature of individuals and cultures...about arriving at some sort of truth that’s universal, not local. In the end, the text simultaneously opens out as far as it can: the universe, and zooms in as close as it can: the Bathtub. (229-30)

My concern about his analysis is that the stories and testimonies of Katrina survivors will be erased, much like the voices and experiences of underprivileged people and communities are often erased. By not reading Post-Katrina literature in local ways, and only thinking about the universal, we run the risk of erasing the testimonial links to Katrina. This fear of erasure mirrors sentiments from the authors of “To Render

Ourselves Visible: Women of Color Organizing and Hurricane Katrina.” The authors write, “The story of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath is in many ways a story of a shifting boundary between the visibility and invisibility of people most impacted by these disasters, and the dangers and opportunities inherent in both” (Bierria, Liebenthal, and Incite! 32). If, as Jellenik claims, post-Katrina texts are moving away from the immediate concerns of those directly affected by Hurricane Katrina, including the *ways* they were most affected by the storm (poverty, race, government failure, and environmental) and into more generic, universal themes of loss and grief, then we are removing the voices of what those people most directly affected the storm are concerned about. And it is not that Jellenik says that these ideas are being completely ignored; he says that post-Katrina authors are still writing about them. Rather, he is claiming that these ideas and themes are no longer the primary concern, and that post-Katrina literature is, in some ways, improved by this shift.

My approach, however, is that they do not need to be mutually exclusive. If we consider that post-Katrina literature is best represented by the pantemporal event-space, which means multiple, *even conflicting*, ideas or themes can occur simultaneously, then the local and the universal exist as one. I think, too, that Jellenik might agree with me, as he is using language throughout his chapter that considers multiplicities and convergences, but only through my dissertation and the naming of those multiplicities as the pantemporal event-space, can we truly understand post-Katrina literature and its primary aims and concerns. In *Beasts*, I hope it has become clear, how *unclear* the film portrays these concepts. We cannot simply read it as a piece of resistance, because it asks us to reconnect. We cannot read it as just a text about this particular moment, because it

is reflective and asks us to consider the past, both in how *Hushpuppy* develops over the film, but also in its relationship to the Katrina event. On the inverse, it should not be read as a solely universal experience, because its narrative asks the reader to consider the specifics of this event as well. *Beasts*, as I argue all Post-Katrina texts do, needs to be cloudy and amorphous, to exist in multiple temporalities and critical engagements at once. The pantemporal event-space, and Post-Katrina literary representations of it, allow us to continually (re)engage with these local, universal, social, environmental, testimonial, short- and long-term concepts as they intersect and overlap.

### **Conclusion**

*Beasts of the Southern Wild*, as I have shown, belongs in the canon of post-Katrina literatures due to its close links to testimonial-style narratives, the way that the film represents and challenges notions of race and environment (as well as the interplay and intersections between the two), and, perhaps most strongly, in its unique and powerful representation of my concept of the pantemporal event-space. Over the next two chapters, as I examine two other post-Katrina texts—the novel *Salvage the Bones* and the television show *Treme*, respectively—I will continue to explore the complexities of this pantemporality, both in form and in theme. To reiterate my desire to begin my analyses of post-Katrina texts with *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, I would like to close with a summation of how the film brings the pantemporal experience to life for the viewer, so to speak, in order to set up a reference point for comparing and contrasting this representation against the later examinations of the representations in *Salvage the Bones* and *Treme*.

The pantemporal event-space occurs in three ways, simultaneously in experience, but these ways can often be presented separately when they appear in post-Katrina texts. First, the event must reveal to those who experience it hidden, often problematic, concepts related to environment and/or space (Neimanis and Walker's concept of weathering). Second, the event must reveal to those who experience it hidden, often problematic, concepts related to society and culture, including, but not limited to, race, gender, class, and/or sexuality. And finally, third, the event must cause the experiencer to make sense of the rupture by calling to mind multiple temporalities in the moment of the event (though, that moment's duration might be brief or extended), and thus experience overlapping temporal contemplation of past, present, and/or future simultaneously.

In *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, two representational modes exist which allow the viewer to partake in a version of the pantemporal event-space. The first of these is Hushpuppy, and her pantemporal consciousness, which gives a six-year-old girl the ability to call to mind historical memory to try and understand the present circumstances while being mindful of how the present impacts the future. The second mode is the Aurochs as global warming and climate change brought to life and made visible to human perceptions of time, which often go unnoticed and remain easily hidden as a result of our failure to perceive them. All of these, while presented independently in the film, overlap and allow the characters and the viewer to productively challenge conceptions of race, class, and environment and the impacts that we have on each other and the spaces around us, as well as how other people and the environment impact and shape us.

## CHAPTER THREE

### DAY BY DAY, BEFORE AND AFTER:

#### *SALVAGE THE BONES* AND THE PANTEMPORALITY OF SOCIOCULTURAL HISTORICAL MEMORY

In the previous chapter, I more firmly explained and established my concept of the pantemporal event-space using *Beasts of the Southern Wild* as my sample text in building the requirements for that particular element of Post-Katrina literature. In the Introduction, I explored the role that testimony played in shaping Post-Katrina literatures, specifically, in how those testimonies were engaging with complex social and historical issues of race, class, and environment. I am going to shift the structure of these next two final chapters slightly. Each will be separated into three sub-sections, covering three core elements of Post-Katrina literature: (1) the social commentary the text engages, (2) the particular representation of the pantemporal event-space, and (3) the testimonial elements of the text and the ways that it mirrors actual testimonies given during and after Hurricane Katrina. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate a more holistic and practical analysis for identifying and incorporating texts into the umbrella of Post-Katrina literature. This builds on the work that I did in the first two chapters by exploring the ways that these final two texts I am looking at fulfill the three major requirements that I argue comprise Post-Katrina literature.

This chapter will focus on Jesmyn Ward's 2011 novel *Salvage the Bones* and its use of race and class dynamics on the Gulf Coast to provide social commentary related to Katrina, the two ways the novel seeks to replicate the pantemporal event-space, and finally how Ward uses the novel as a way to testify to her own family's experience during

Hurricane Katrina, while also mirroring the testimonies of other survivors as well. *Salvage the Bones* tells the story of the Batiste family and their experiences leading up to, and including the arrival of, Hurricane Katrina. The Batiste family is made up of Esch, who narrates the novel, her father, and her three brothers, Randall, Skeetah, and Junior. Esch's mother died while giving birth to Junior, the youngest of the family, and though she does not have a role in the narrative temporality of the novel, the memory of her runs deeply throughout the novel as Esch navigates her own role within her family, her own early pregnancy (referring both to Esch's young age at 14, as well as the pregnancy being in the early stages), and the coming and occurring hurricane. Esch has been forced to take on the role of mother in her family, even before her own pregnancy, and this role is something that she grapples with throughout the novel.

In the first section of this chapter, I will explore a more traditional approach of analysis to *Salvage the Bones*, looking at it through the lenses of race and environment. I will also look at the space that the Batiste family lives in, a location they refer to as the Pit, and how that space can be read as a metaphor for the sociohistorical experiences of its inhabitants, both past and present. Additionally, the novel draws a stark contrast between the Pit and the spaces of its closest neighbors, particular those neighbors who are white. As I close out the first sub-section, I will look at the links between poverty and what Rob Nixon refers to as "the environmentalism of the poor," and how the novel portrays those links.

Next, I will examine the ways that the novel works in a pantemporal way. In thinking about the novel's approaches to temporality and the pantemporal event-space, the twelve chapters take place during the ten days that lead up to Hurricane Katrina



(Chapters 1-10), Hurricane Katrina itself (Chapter 11), and the day after Hurricane Katrina hit (Chapter 12). The novel also employs interesting shifts in tense, with certain days/chapters related entirely in the present tense and others partially in past and partially in present tenses. This fluctuation is an element of pantemporality in that Esch's narration exists in multiple temporalities at once: she is speaking from the future of the narrative temporal space, but she shifts her telling of events as if they are currently occurring or have already occurred, and she also inserts references to her own past and her family's past, which occur outside of the narrative temporal space. I also consider the temporality of the reader in this experience as well, both in terms of reading and in terms of distance to Hurricane Katrina, particularly in the conclusion of this chapter. These temporal chapter and tense structures will be looked at in more detail in the second section of this chapter when I examine how the novel seeks to replicate the pantemporal event-space of Hurricane Katrina.

Finally, I will look specifically at how *Salvage the Bones* uses personal testimony. The early chapters have Esch relating to the reader the normalcy of everyday life for the Batiste family: she talks about homework assignments, boy troubles, and her family; Skeetah is caring for the puppies delivered by his prize pitbull China; Randall is focused on an upcoming basketball camp that could be his ticket to going to college; Junior is trying to figure himself out as the youngest member of the family by 6 years, wants to be taken more seriously, and gets into other mischief one might expect an eight-year-old boy to get into. While all of these mundane activities take place, Esch talks about news reports mentioning Hurricane Katrina and its growing strength, and the family also begins preparing for its arrival. This coupled idea of dealing with the storm, a storm that

many did not perceive as a serious threat, while also dealing with living at a disadvantage based on race and class will be explored in more detail in the final section of this chapter, when I look at how *Salvage the Bones* brings up ideas and concepts shared with many personal testimonies, including some overlap with Ward's family's own experiences during Hurricane Katrina.

While each of the next three sections could stand on their own, the ideas found in each of them are inherently reliant on each other. As I begin with a more traditional, close-reading analysis of the novel, I will explore how Esch's perceptions of her surroundings help shape the reader's understanding of race, class, and environment. The next section, dealing with how the novel replicates the pantemporal event-space, will build off of those concepts of race, class, and environment to look at how both their individual and overlapping temporalities are portrayed in the book. The final section will itself build off of the first two by comparing the commonalities between some personal testimonies and *Salvage the Bones*, specifically in relation to how both the testimonies and the novel are making similar arguments (about race, class, and environment) in similar ways (by embracing pantemporalities). In thinking about all of these sections together, I am arguing for one way that Post-Katrina literatures utilize and frame the pantemporal event-space: as an experience of shared personal and sociocultural historical memory. Post-Katrina literatures, in this way, are a blending of the political and the universal, and *Salvage the Bones* is an excellent representation of this.

### **Commentary of the Novel:**

*Salvage the Bones* tells the story of the Batiste family's days leading up to Hurricane Katrina, as well as their experiences during and immediately following the

storm. The narrator of the story is the sole remaining female in the Batiste family, Esch, who lives in a section of fictional Bois Sauvage, Mississippi known by its inhabitants as “the Pit,” a “gap in the woods [Esch’s grandfather] cleared and built on” (Ward 1). Much like “The Bathtub” in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, this spatial moniker is both symbolic and literal. The Pit is a place describe by Esch as being physically ripped and empty because of the cultural and economic position of her family, while also holding metaphorical meanings linked to race and class. She narrates,

It was Papa Joseph nicknamed it all the Pit, Papa Joseph who let the white men he work with dig for clay that they used to lay the foundation for houses, let them excavate the side of a hill in a clearing near the back of the property where he used to plant corn for feed. Papa Joseph let them take all the dirt they wanted until their digging had created a cliff over a dry lake in the backyard, and the small stream that had run around...the hill had diverted and pooled into the dry lake, making it into a pond, and then Papa Joseph thought the earth would give under the water, that the pond would spread and gobble up the property and make it a swamp, so he stopped selling earth for money. (Ward 14)

She continues, explaining the current state of the Pit:

We dump our garbage in a shallow ditch next to the pit, and we burn it. When the pine needles from the surrounding trees fall in and catch fire, it smells okay. Otherwise it smells like burnt plastic.... The water in the pit was low; we hadn’t had a good rain in weeks. The shower we needed was out in the Gulf, held like a tired, hungry child by the storm forming there. When there’s good rain in the

summer, the pit fills to the brim and we swim in it. The water, which was normally pink, had turned a thick, brownish red. The color of a scab. (14)

The descriptions of The Pit establish it as a place in which people live in poverty, a poverty that is difficult for them to escape, as well as a poverty that is generational. Rob Nixon introduces a similar concept in his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Nixon writes, “Confronted with the militarization of both commerce and development, impoverished communities are often assailed by coercion and bribery that test their cohesive resilience” (4). Communities like the Bathtub are often forced between preserving their space or letting others come in and utilize it for financial gain. Esch’s grandfather was forced to sell land in order to earn a living, but this came at the expense of destroying his own environment to do so, and Esch and her family are still dealing with the ripple effects of those decisions.

The brief description Esch provides here could easily be applied to similar situations of NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) policies, and the ways that they disproportionately affect communities and spaces of color.<sup>15</sup> In other words, often people and communities of color are denied true agency with regards to their own spaces. This complicates what we might mean when we think of a space being “toxic.” Typically, if we refer to “toxic” spaces, our mind immediately places pollution, waste, or the disposal of other substances at the forefront. Something that Katrina accomplished was a broadening and complicating of that concept. Toxic spaces can now be understood metaphorically as well, as those spaces in which people are forced to survive in environments that are downtrodden, situated in non-ideal locations, or are otherwise

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<sup>15</sup> See the work of Laura Pulido and Robert Bullard, among others, for more on NIMBY policies and politics.

hostile politically, culturally, or economically, without needing to be directly related to toxic *substances* primarily. That is not to say that overlap between these toxicities does not exist or that biologically toxic spaces are not worth our attention or discussion. Instead, I argue that Katrina and its literatures are working to expand our conception of what toxic can mean.

This notion is closely linked to Stacy Alaimo's idea of trans-corporeality. Alaimo argues how more traditional modes of "environmental justice movements must produce or employ scientific data that track environmental hazards, placing a new sort of materiality at the forefront of many of these struggles" (62). The physicality of toxicity is separated from the sociocultural reality of it. What this ignores, according to Alaimo, is the interplay between that material space and the social space, which locations such as the Pit or the Bathtub are constructed within. The social informs the material-spatial, and vice versa, enabling an environmental justice analysis "in which social power and material/geographic agencies intra-act" (63). The choice of "intra-" rather than "inter-" is important, particularly for the ways that it signals their inherent connectivity; the social and the material interact from within, because they must be understood as existing within the same plane.

Nancy Tuana links a similar concept to her own ideas about what it means to witness Katrina. She argues for an "interactionist ontology," one that "*rematerializes the social and takes seriously the agency of the natural*" (Tuana 188). Tuana is using language not unlike my own analyses of Post-Katrina literature and the ways the hurricane can be seen as a transgressive event, especially as she emphasizes the agency of the natural. I will return to this idea more below, but for now I want to highlight her use

of the term “interactionst,” which again implies a bringing together of multiple concepts under a single umbrella, something Post-Katrina literature is highly concerned with replicating.

Beyond my concept of pantemporal convergence, Post-Katrina literature also works intersectionally, in the academic sense of the term, by allowing the reader to experience and discuss various critical modes simultaneously, whether racial, economic, gender, or environment, among others, depending on the text. More importantly, Tuana’s phrase “rematerializes the social” closely mirrors Alaimo’s trans-corporeality, and my own views of Post-Katrina literature’s convergences, in that the social, generational poverty and exploitation linked to the changes in physical space of the Pit, marks it as a toxic environment, and the physicality of that toxicity is understood through the social factors that created it. It becomes a feedback loop of sorts. This type of toxic environment that I am arguing for, while not necessarily pantemporal, is certainly convergent, in the same way that Alaimo’s concept of trans-corporeality and Tuana’s concept of witnessing Katrina are convergent: allowing multiple experiences to exist simultaneously, whether social and material, body and nature, past and present, or, for Post-Katrina literatures, as I see them, all of these at once.

Laura Pulido’s work “Rethinking Environmental Racism: White Privilege and Urban Development in Southern California” helps me explain how these concepts of witnessing and trans-corporeality can be linked to institutional racism and white privilege, particularly in how they become multi-generational. Pulido writes, “White privilege, together with overt and institutionalized racism, reveals how racism shapes places. Hence, instead of asking if an incinerator was placed in a Latino community

because the owner was prejudiced, I ask, why is it that whites are not comparably burdened with pollution?” (13). When thinking about space and race, then, we must not simply consider why communities of color are disadvantaged, but also why white communities are so easily able to enact NIMBY laws to prevent it from happening to them. Part of this understanding can only come from thinking about the issue using Tuana’s interactionism, about thinking through the social and natural simultaneously, even as we might understand them individually, which allows us to “dissolve the divisions between these two poles [realism and social constructivism] and transform the terms of the debate” (Tuana 191).

In the novel, and the Pit specifically, there are a set of natural and physical changes. Some of these are a result of natural environmental events, such as erosion and tree growth, but others are a result of particular social and economic practices linked to privilege, or the lack thereof. We cannot simply demonize Esch’s grandfather for selling the earth around the Pit, even though from an environmental perspective that is arguably an unsustainable practice and should be frowned upon. However, he had few other options, if any, to financially provide for his family, so from a critical race or whiteness perspective, we can understand why he made those choices. In thinking about the creation of the Pit, or in thinking about the creation of any space, the physical and the social must be examined both separately and together. In other words, there are physical and social contexts that exist independently of each other, yet their interactions can be far more important in shaping the construction of spaces, and in our analysis of them after the fact.

Even the name of *Salvage the Bones*' fictional city itself—Bois Sauvage—holds a multiplicity or convergence of meaning. The city, translated from French, would mean “Wild Wood.” This becomes both literal and figurative in the context of the novel. The woods themselves are wild, unruly, and overgrown, while at the same time the inhabitants of the Pit are viewed by outsiders, through Esch’s perceptions at least, as wild and unruly as well. The space itself has a blended identity, combining two types of space into one, as nature has retaken certain areas once held by human construction, with their home having a back door that “has been grown over with wisteria and kudzu for years” (Ward 60), and the house itself “is the color of rust, nearly invisible under the oaks and behind the rubbish, lopsided. The cement bricks it sits on are the color of the sand” (115). Beyond this blending, the Pit is also a space that’s identity is largely shaped by what surrounds it, by *what it is not*. Esch became acutely aware of this difference when one year her school changed the bus route. She explains, “we were picked up at 6:30 A.M. and for the next hour we rode up and out of the black Bois that we knew and into the white Bois that we didn’t” (Ward 70). The Batistes’ closest neighbors are a white family whose own homestead is everything that the Batiste’s do not have, but quite possibly need, not only during a hurricane but also every day. The novel thus asks us to think about the differences between spaces in ways explored by environmental justice scholars such as Pulido, by clearly delineating the physicality and aesthetics of differing spaces that have been defined by their racial inhabitants. Over the course of the novel, Esch becomes more aware of her identity, as well as her family’s, within that space by thinking deeply about what her family has as well as what it lacks. These things are not simply material, either, as the history of her family is a constant reminder of those who have



come before but no longer remain. I will discuss this concept of absence and memory, particularly how they correlate to space and race, in more detail in the next sections of this chapter, with how they play a role in the novel and in how the novel uses the pantemporal event-space to make the reader aware of the absence.

Additionally, Esch's description of the Pit establishes two key metaphors for environment and space, important to both this novel and to Post-Katrina literature more generally: (1) the idea of nature as change maker and (2) the idea that space, when read and analyzed, can be a revelatory mechanism. Here, those metaphors are represented by the storm as bringing a much-needed shower and the image of the pond as a scab. I have already addressed nature as capable of bringing change in the Introduction and Chapter Two, specifically in relation to work done by scholars Timothy Cresswell and Jane Bennett. To refresh, I am using these two scholars in conjunction with one another to help explain my concept of storms and disasters, neither of which are intentional or conscious decisions, being read as transgressive events. Interestingly, in many Post-Katrina texts the storm itself *does* become conscious (or is at least *presented* as having agency or intention). Cresswell explains in *In Place, Out of Place* how acts of transgression are responsive, dictated by bodies moving through spaces where they are deemed "out of place," thus revealing the ways that ideologies are constructed at the expense of particular groups being placed in a disadvantaged position. Bennett goes into further detail with my idea, specifically thinking about nature as inherently political and easily read as such.

The second idea found in the passage—of space as readable and analyzable—should be something familiar to scholars of ecocriticism and environmental justice, as it

is foundational to those critical lenses. Here, we are given the specific metaphor of a scab, which points to two spatial readings of the Pit. First, a scab implies a wound, that the space has been physically harmed and altered in some way. This wound can be read as what her grandfather allowed to be done to the space, or, as it should be read in the context of this novel within Post-Katrina literature, as what Hurricane Katrina does to the space. Secondly, the scab also hints at what can occur once it has healed. If it heals correctly, if the space is put back in such a way as to right any injustices involved in its initial (re)construction, then it should, in theory, heal without leaving a scar. However, if we do not allow the scab to heal over correctly, then it will leave a scar—a constant reminder of past wounds that exist in the present and into the future. Environmental wounds, particularly ones that adversely affect poor communities of color, do not heal so easily, and so those scars often remain, serving as a reminder to future generations or to other communities that have experienced similar destruction.

Glenn Jellenik, and his essay “Re-shaping the Narrative: Pulling Focus/Pushing Boundaries in Fictional Representations of Hurricane Katrina,” an essay that I discussed at length in Chapter Two, misses the mark in describing the “waves” of Katrina literatures. He puts *Salvage the Bones* in the same second-wave category as *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, which he marks as Post-Katrina texts that move away from overtly political and racial themes and into more universal tropes of survival and loss. I see his work as creating contradictions in his analysis of *Salvage the Bones*. He overlooks the metaphor of the scab/wound as a symbol of flawed racial and environmental healing. Jellenik writes of the first-wave of Katrina texts as being “a narrative that *tears open infected southern wounds* to reveal systemic poverty that stems from an age-old witch’s

brew of...racism, and governmental ineptitude” (226). His own metaphor for first-wave Katrina literatures, which he argues are *too* focused on these issues, is used by Ward herself in the novel to get the reader to focus on these issues. How can Ward both use these metaphors but also be moving away from them? The short answer is that, according to how I read and identify Post-Katrina texts, she cannot. That being said, like so many things related to Post-Katrina literature, *she can do both*.

To explain, Jellenik discusses Jesmyn Ward’s essay from *Oxford American* in which she relates her and her family’s experience during Hurricane Katrina. He specifically argues that Ward’s essay is marked under first-wave Katrina literature, but that *Salvage the Bones* moves away from the political into the universal. His contradiction in this argument comes as he explains, “Despite the fact that Ward’s novel treats the same event and re-activates many of the same elements as her essay, the central focus and thrust of the novel have shifted” (226). His claim is that, even as the novel follows along with Ward’s first-wave Katrina themes, *Salvage the Bones*

employs a limited...perspective. *Salvage’s* first-person narrator...has no access to any overall perspective on anything outside her very limited experience. Her, and her family’s, utter isolation from anything approximating mainstream America prevents the novel from accessing and replicating the traditional Katrina narrative arc. While the novel represents the family’s poverty and *suggests* a racial component to their endemic lack, the immediate world constructed by and consuming the novel is too limited to push such concerns to the forefront. (227)

In short, Jellenik’s analysis directly clashes with the work that I am doing in this dissertation, and I will explain why, briefly here and more in depth over the remainder of

this chapter. For one, Jellenik seems to ignore the role that testimony and narrative play in shaping Post-Katrina texts, even as he pulls from Ward's own personal essay. Shoshana Felman explains the close link between testimony and narrative, arguing, "Joining events to language, the narrator-as-eyewitness is the testimonial *bridge* which, mediating between narrative and history, guarantees their correspondence and adherence to each other" (Felman and Laub 101). Jellenik wants to understand Post-Katrina texts as moving away from the political into the universal, but the two are too firmly linked for poor people of color. For them, these personal experiences are, unfortunately, universal ideas and relate to ideas I presented in both of the earlier chapters, specifically my notions of how testimony and memory shape present experiences. Jellenik's reading that *Salvage the Bones* simply "suggests" a racial component to their endemic lack is a gross misreading of the novel and the ways that Ward takes great care to establish the spatial history and identity of the Pit early on.

His notion that Esch is limited in her ability to be a narrator because she is isolated is also easily argued against for two things that the novel does: Esch's use of memory and history to consider her own present and Esch's readings of Greek Mythology and its application to her own present. Both of these elements, that Jellenik considers limiting, I would argue are what gives the novel its pantemporality and its convergence, thereby allowing the novel to bridge the important personal experiences of Katrina survivors with larger sociocultural issues experienced by others around the country. I will be examining these ideas more in the following section, as I look at how *Salvage the Bones* replicates the pantemporal event-space of Hurricane Katrina. For now, it simply serves as a way of understanding how Post-Katrina texts, by their very

definition (which I am establishing in this dissertation), cannot fall neatly into categories, but ebb and flow between them. I understand the irony of this statement in relation to the overall trajectory of this dissertation. To clarify, it is not that Post-Katrina literature is uncategorizable, but that its inherent interactionism and convergence allow it to exist in multiple categories at once. It can be both first-wave and second-wave Post-Katrina literature. It could even be neither of those, and somehow exist within a third-wave that has yet to be analyzed yet.

I want to return to the ways the novel compares the Batiste space with that of the white neighbors, but more specifically to look at how the novel compares the preparations the Batistes go through to what the reader is given of the white neighbors' home. This idea of preparation is interesting in the context of Katrina as a whole, because preparation itself is a loaded concept. Depending on several cultural and economic factors, one's ability to effectively prepare for a storm can be hindered. I will return to this idea later in this chapter as I examine the testimonial links between the novel and Katrina survivors, but for now I want to look closely at how the novel itself thinks about preparation and the repetitive nature of storms. Much like the testimonies of Katrina survivors, the characters in *Salvage the Bones* take the coming storm at various levels of seriousness, with many treating it with a mundane shrug of the shoulders. Surviving storms for people on the Gulf Coast is a part of life; doing so while also dealing with poverty and race is, sadly, also a part of life for poor communities of color as well.

*Salvage the Bones* introduces this theme of mundanity almost immediately. Esch describes her mother giving birth to her youngest brother Junior. Each of the children was delivered in the same bed, "so when it was time for Junior, she thought she could do the

same. It didn't work that way" (Ward 1). As the reader learns, Esch's mother died while giving birth to Junior. Something that had become routine for her, that had always been uncomplicated, was now the thing that would claim her life. As a metaphor for Hurricane Katrina, that is chilling. A few pages later, the mundane nature of hurricanes for people on the Gulf Coast is given. Esch explains, "It's summer, and when it's summer, there's always a hurricane coming to leaving here" (Ward 4). When something becomes so commonplace, it becomes a part of our lives; it goes unnoticed. Routines are helpful, but they can also be damaging, particularly when thinking of commonplace routines in the framework of the work of Cresswell and Ahmed. When damaging ideology becomes unnoticed, it can easily continue unchecked, thereby harming those it exploits.

There are two specific moments in which Esch and her family goes to their neighbor's house; neither moment paints Esch or her brother Skeetah in the most positive light. Both, however, demonstrate the ways, much like Esch's grandfather, people in poverty-stricken communities like the Pit are sometimes forced to break the law in order to survive. The first of these moments comes in Chapter Four, when Skeetah gets Esch to help him sneak into the house of the white neighbors to steal medicine for China and her pups. In this scene, the storm is still several days away, so the white neighbors are still around and have not done much to prepare for the storm. They are chased away as they steal the medicine by the dog who lives with that family and are only saved when China steps between them. Chapter Four begins with Esch talking about the home of her grandparents in a nearby part of the Pit, and ends with Esch and her siblings, along with Big Henry, going to the white neighbors' home to steal some medicine for China. Esch describes her grandparents' home as "a drying animal skeleton, everything inside that

was evidence of living salvaged over the years,” that she and her family “pick at...like mostly eaten leftovers” (Ward 58). There is an openness to the house, both literally in that it has been so scavenged, but also metaphorically in that Esch sees in that space a history that has been passed down. It is open to her, because she is able to read it positively. Later, as they go to steal from their neighbors, Esch explains that space as looking wrong, “there was too much blue” because of how the sky opened up around that house (Ward 64). Here again we see another conception of openness, one that holds a darker connotation.

This complexity of being open mirrors the work of Dixon discussed throughout this dissertation, in that spatial meaning often holds multiple definitions at once for people of color, and this is no different. In one instance—the openness of her family’s space—that definition is peaceful and comforting; in the other—the way it is linked to the white space—it is jarring and off. Esch describes the house more, slightly later in the chapter:

The house is plain from all angles: its white is faded to tan by the sun, and all the windows are shut with white curtains drawn over them. It’s a blind house with closed eyes.... The barn is unpainted and tall, and the doors are shut. The wood is old and dark, like the kind of wood Papa Joseph used to build Mother Lisbeth’s house. (71)

Of note in Esch’s description are the metaphors for sight and seeing, and how they link to open and closed spaces: the windows are shut, and the house itself is blind; no one can see in, and no one can see out. This house becomes an embodiment of white privilege, as it is a space that allows its inhabitants to remain ignorant of what surrounds it, of how it

shapes others. Additionally interesting is the fact that Esch links the barn to the home of her grandparents. There is a connection between these two drastically different spaces, but that connection comes through an historical link. Esch is in the wake in this moment, fully aware of how these two spaces are constructed according to the same foundations (the wood), but according to drastically different rules. The wood in white space is worthy only of a barn, to hold those items that are for service, and all of the historical implications that come with thinking about service. As I explained earlier in the chapter, the wood suggests a way of thinking about how the Pit is constructed by what surrounds it, and how what surrounds it serves as a constant reminder of what the Pit is not, of what it has not.

The second time they visit the house is in Chapter Ten, the day before Hurricane Katrina makes landfall. This time it is Randall who asks Esch to accompany him to the white people's house for supplies as they are putting the finishing touches on preparing for the storm. Here Esch makes note of the ways that the house of the white neighbors has been more effectively prepared to withstand the hurricane. Esch narrates,

The windows of the house and the barn have been boarded over with thick pieces of plywood... The boards of the house are more even, more secure. They are not a patch-up of boards of different sizes like our house; there is no glass left peeking through cracks, only plywood closed smooth and tight as eyelids. (Ward 207)

This is the second time we get a sense of the house as having some sort of vision, or lack thereof. Earlier the house was described as blind because of the drawn curtains. I would argue that this again functions as a criticism of white privilege, and the ways that those who are able to utilize that privilege are often both/either blind to it or wish to remain



unaware of it. In the previous instance in Chapter Four, the blindness indicates a passive denial; the description of the boarded windows as closed, tight eyelids in Chapter Ten, however, implies an active denial, in which some truth has been presented, yet is chosen to be ignored.

Not only were the white neighbors able to leave with plenty of time to spare ahead of the storm's arrival, they were able to do so in such a way that also speaks to their privilege, beyond just the type of plywood they were able to use. As they attempt to break into the house this time, Esch peers through the plywood they broke through, and the first thing she notices is, "Under the darkness, there is the empty smell of potpourri and Pine-Sol" (Ward 209). The family not only was able to evacuate, but they were able to clean their house and keep it smelling fresh and clean for their return. Comparing this to what happens to what the Batiste's biggest concerns are in preparing for the storm—what to eat, protecting China and what puppies are still alive, how to secure their home effectively—speaks volumes to the privilege of this white home and its inhabitants. Again, the Pit's identity is shaped by what surrounds it, by constantly reminding the space and its inhabitants of what they are not, of what they do not have.

Something interesting also occurs during this second moment, and it helps show how *Salvage the Bones* is working to converge the social with the natural in its critical engagements. Something that has become noticeably absent for Esch as the storm approaches are the animals, which had been present to her earlier. In addition to no truck, man, woman, or dog, "there are no chattering squirrels, no haunted rabbits, no wading turtles. I don't know where they have gone, but there are none here. When I look up into the sky...I see birds in great flocks that would darken the sun if we could see it" (Ward

206). This preparation of animals links closely with the preparation of Esch and her family, and Esch herself even seems to make this connection a few times. It also connects the Batistes to the societal perceptions of them that I mentioned earlier: the wild identity of the Pit becomes linked to its inhabitants. They too are perceived as wild, and Skeetah even admits to one of his friends Manny, “We savages up here on the Pit” (Ward 95). Later, as the family is trying to figure out how much, and what kind of, food they have available to weather the storm, and how they might cook it without electricity, the conversation turns to the possibility of eating dog food. Skeetah remarks, “It’s salty. Taste like pecans. And if worse comes to worst, we can eat like China” (193). Randall retorts with, “We ain’t no dogs... And you ain’t either” (193). This again asks the reader to think critically about the perception of poor people of color as “less than,” a concept I discussed in the Introduction, and how that stereotype can permeate those who it disadvantages as well. Randall is the voice of resistance and the reminder that, regardless of how little they have and how society might see them, they are still human beings and should be afforded the same basic rights to live and survive.

Throughout the novel, Esch is constantly noticing the ways that animals are behaving differently the closer that Hurricane Katrina gets to making landfall. Esch explains, “Before a hurricane, the animals that can, leave. Birds fly north out of the storm, and everything else roams as far away from the winds and rain as possible” (Ward 45). The implication in her statement is pointedly critical of preparation related to Katrina, particularly with everything we know about the failure of the government to properly warn people in advance to evacuate and the ways that, regardless of that warning, many poor people of color could not have evacuated anyway. Shortly after Esch

offers this commentary, she begins to pay attention to some squirrels running through the treetops. Again, her observation can clearly be linked to a critical perspective about Katrina. She says, “The squirrels like the oaks best, run along their black, hard branches like highway overpasses. These are their solid houses; they will withstand a storm, if she comes” (45-6). What is interesting about this observation is the linking of the squirrels’ homes to highway overpasses, spaces that became makeshift homes for many people after Hurricane Katrina hit. Yet, her statement also carries a sharp critique of what types of home can, in fact, withstand a storm, particularly when we think about this description of oaks with the comparison of wood types used in the Batistes preparation versus the plywood used by the white neighbors.

As the storm grows, Esch, again, begins to notice these shifts in behavior mentioned above when they return to the white neighbors. The ways that various animals are able to more effectively prepare and protect themselves for the coming storm, compared to the Batistes, is referenced again and again. Even the chickens that the family has and lets run around the property are starting to prepare. Esch explains how “the chickens are sitting in a low tree, on some old fence posts, on an old washing machine, on the dump truck and the bonfire wood of their collapsed chicken coop. They huddle, and it is as if they can’t bear to be on the ground, in the blowing dirt” (Ward 196). Then, later, as she goes to look for eggs for the family to eat, she says, “The chickens have made their own plans for the storm; they have packed their eggs away, hidden them well” (198). The animals are not only able to better prepare by making “their own plans,” but they also seem more keenly aware of what is coming. The way the animals can sense the storm more effectively is closely linked with the ways that many people preparing for Katrina

did not have effective access to communication, which often made their ability to prepare lacking. I will discuss this idea more in depth in the last section of this chapter, when I look at how many people shared similar testimonies about how and where they received information about the storm. The novel itself, as I will show in that section, even demonstrates this by showing the broken television and radio signals that come through to the Batistes.

The last moment that Esch comments on the ways that animals prepare for the storm also sets up the next section of my analysis: how the novel replicates the pantemporal event-space. One of the ways that the novel becomes pantemporal comes as Esch utilizes stories, memory, and history to make sense of her present experience(s). As Chapter Eleven opens, Esch begins with a long paragraph in which she first learned from her mother what a hurricane was. Esch explains that when this happened,

I thought that all the animals ran away, that they fled the storms before they came, that they put their noses to the wind days before and knew... And maybe the bigger animals do. But now I think that other animals, like the squirrels and the rabbits, don't do that at all. Maybe the small don't run. Maybe the small pause on their branches...and they prepare like us" (Ward 215).

What is most interesting to me about Esch's realization is how she sets up a dichotomy within the animal world in terms of preparation: one group, the larger animals, are able to flee and run, *are more likely to survive as a result*. The other group, the smaller animals, must stay and prepare and hope for the best, including all of the danger that comes along with staying. That she links this realization to the memory of her mother is also important, for reasons that I will turn to in this next section.

### **Pantemporality of the Novel:**

*Salvage the Bones* evinces my concept of the pantemporal event-space, both in content and form, as a narrative strategy to reflect on Hurricane Katrina. As explained in the previous chapter, Post-Katrina literature utilizes and complicates temporality in various ways (and in different ways, depending on the medium) as it seeks to both reconcile and reproduce the pantemporal event-space of the storm, allowing for the reader to similarly understand the concept of pantemporal convergence as they read and watch, and experience it vicariously through the text. For a film such as *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, that pantemporality comes through within the narrative of the film, through Hushpuppy and her ability to serve as narrator of past, present, future, and through the ways that film visually and metaphorically represents climate change and environmental time. *Salvage the Bones*, on the other hand, uses three primary methods to replicate pantemporality for the reader: the chapter structure, playing with verb tense in some sections, switching between present and past quickly within single sections, and the use of stories and memory to make sense of the present. Because the novel, as a Post-Katrina text, is pantemporal, these methods do not function independently of each other, but work together and overlap as they replicate the pantemporal event-space. That said, I will do my best to tackle their use in *Salvage the Bones* separately, but I should note that, as I do so, there might be some bleed through or repetition over the next several paragraphs. Throughout all of these methods, Ward's novel keeps the reader focused on temporality, placing it at the forefront of the reading experience, thus reinforcing the shared social and environmental experiences of Katrina survivors and those who are witness to the testimony of those survivors.

As I briefly explained earlier, *Salvage the Bones* has a chapter structure grounded in temporal experience: each of the twelve chapters takes place over one day: Chapter One is titled “The First Day: Birth in a Bare-Bulb Place;” Chapter Two is “The Second Day: Hidden Eggs”; and so on, with the remaining chapters beginning with “The X Day,” with an accompanied thematic sub-title. In framing the novel in this way, the readers’ experience can overlap with the Batistes’, and allow for some temporal reproduction of Katrina. The temporality of the reader, shortened as it is, is shared with the temporality of the narrative. However, this sharing is not a perfect one-to-one ratio. The temporality of Esch and her family and the temporality of the reader converge into one another, similar to how Hurricane Katrina caused social-historical-natural temporalities to converge and overlap. In the same way that Ward provides a condensed version of each day’s activities, Hurricane Katrina condensed social and natural, long- and short-term temporalities into that singular pantemporal event-space. Each chapter takes place over one day in the Batiste’s lives, but they do not take a day to read. Esch’s narration, while framed in a day-by-day structure, does not exist in that actual day-length temporality for the reader, yet at the same time the reader is experiencing Esch and her family’s life over that particular day.

What is interesting about how Ward has chosen to testify to the reader through Esch is how Esch tells her story *as if it is currently occurring*. However, this also means that the reader enters each day in media res, that we often do not have what came before, and also that we might have information from after the narration for a particular day missing between that chapter’s end and the next one’s beginning. Yet, as readers, these missing details are unnecessary in some ways, because the time in the novel itself runs

parallel to time in the historical event of Hurricane Katrina. This parallelism mirrors Paul Ricoeur's concept of mimesis, particularly in how he argues for its ability to become "a reference back to the familiar pre-understanding we have of the order of action; an entry into the realm of poetic composition; and finally a new configuration by means of this poetic refiguring of the pre-understood order of action" (xi). This refers to the ways in which historical time, like the actual temporality of Hurricane Katrina in post-Katrina texts, is utilized and adapted in narrative ways, so that it no longer needs to be exact and precise, but can simply "refer back to temporality of praxis described by mimesis" (182).

Esch uses the present continuous tense as her primary mode of testimony, save for a few key moments, which I will discuss shortly, in which she shifts into the past tense.<sup>16</sup> Present continuous is an interesting narrative choice for a couple of reasons, all of which deal with the pantemporality of the novel and its close ties to the pantemporal event-space of Hurricane Katrina. First, present continuous implies that Esch's story is always currently happening. It is stuck in time, happening again and again. Second, according to several grammar websites, the present continuous is a tense in which a speaker can talk about *multiple temporalities at once*.<sup>17</sup> Present continuous is often used to convey actions that are happening but have no end in sight, actions that repeatedly occur, or "something *which we think is temporary*" ("Present Continuous," emphasis mine). I will spend some time discussing each of these two ideas in more detail over the next paragraphs.

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<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that Esch does use a past tense throughout the book when she is thinking about her mother or her family's past, but she *is thinking* about them in the present continuous temporality of her narration, so I will be discussing those moments separately from my current focus on the narrative tense.

<sup>17</sup> See: <https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/en/english-grammar/verbs/present-tense/present-continuous>; <http://esl.fis.edu/grammar/rules/prescont.htm#3>; or <https://www.grammarly.com/blog/present-continuous/> for examples.

The cyclical nature of Esch's experience existing in a temporal space that is constantly occurring can help us to understand the pantemporal event-space more, particularly in the ways that people utilize historical narratives, real and fictitious, in order to make sense of their current situations. Ward's temporality in the novel, as in progress, reflexive, and predictive, seems to be working through and possibly blending two concepts of Gerard Genette's: prolepsis and analepsis. Prolepsis is what Genette defines as "any narrative maneuver that consists of narrating or evoking in advance an event that will take place later," while analepsis is "any evocation after the fact of an event that took place earlier than the point in the story where we are at any given moment" (40). As Post-Katrina literature must, this action too, is linked closely to testimony, particularly what Dori Laub describes as, "a record that has yet to be made" (Felman and Laub 57). This comes out through the duality of an event having a pastness, while also being an event that has not been told through testimony, so, in some ways, has not occurred yet. Laub continues,

The victim's narrative—the very process of bearing witness to massive trauma—does indeed begin with someone who testifies to an absence, to *an event that has not yet come into existence*, in spite of the...compelling nature of the reality of its occurrence. (57)

This cyclical temporality of injustice, of telling that which has both occurred and not occurred, is at the forefront of *Salvage the Bones*. It is there in the ways that Esch thinks about her family's history and relationship to the Pit, and in the ways that she thinks about her own role in society and in her family, just as it is at the forefront of testimonies of Katrina survivors and critical and scholarly assessments of Katrina as a disaster event.



The cycle continues unbroken, unfortunately, and keeps affecting people long after whatever singular historical event started the exploitation in the first place.

Christina Sharpe discusses this experience as being in “the wake.” Interestingly, Sharpe uses the term *wake* in multiple ways, similarly to how I am trying to understand the multiplicity of experience and testimony related to Katrina. Some of the ways that Sharpe defines wake include: wake as something left behind, as when a boat moves through water; wakes as funerals; and wake, as in being awake or awoken. To utilize Sharpe’s words, being in the wake is “a method of encountering a past that is not past” (13). Of note as well, is her use throughout of being in the wake, not separate from it or moving through it and then beyond it, mirroring the concept of weathering discussed in my Introduction.

Sharpe’s explanation of how black memory and experience moves through and within these various modes and concepts of the wake, mirror a similar negotiation that Melvin Dixon describes in *Ride Out the Wilderness*, which I discussed in Chapter Two. To refresh, Dixon explains how black writers utilize fluctuating metaphors for nature and wilderness that bounce between extreme ends of a spectrum, yet also exist at both ends simultaneously. These metaphors mirror the complex ways that African Americans experience nature and wilderness. For them, wilderness is seen as both a place to fear and a place to rejoice in, as it was historically a space that offered both salvation and death. Dixon and Sharpe would also argue that this complex construction of wilderness is still experienced by African Americans today; Dixon as he explores the way writers utilize the metaphor, and Sharpe for the ways that, as she reworks a quote from Toni Morrison, “Black people, exist in the residence time of the wake, a time in which ‘everything is

now. It is all now” (Sharpe 41). Mary Ruth Marotte also argues for how *Salvage the Bones* utilizes the theme of pregnancy in similar ways. Marotte connects pregnancy in the novel to disaster events, as she argues,

These pregnancies drawn against the backdrop of Hurricane Katrina...become parallel disasters to the storm... Pregnancy, then, becomes activated in the text and therefore analogous to the storm. These stories are simultaneously productive and destructive and therefore bound up in the narrative history of the ways that African American women writers have written of pregnancy and childbirth. (207)

The ways that Dixon and Sharpe complicate black identity and allow it to exist in that either/or/both/neither space coincides with my own work with the pantemporal event-space, particularly how it utilizes past sociohistorical memory to make sense of present situations. I showed this in the Introduction with my discussion of testimony related to the Hurricane Katrina levee myth and how and why that myth sprung up, as well as in Chapter Two with how Hushpuppy speaks as if she has access to that sociohistorical memory, even as her age might make that access difficult, if not impossible. In *Salvage the Bones*, we get a similar character in Esch, and how she is constantly reflecting on her present by thinking about her mother or the mythology stories she is reading. Sharpe discusses the role that girls have played in being in the wake, as she analyzes a photograph of a girl who lived through the earthquake in Haiti, and the ways that this girl is able to become more than just a “girl.” Sharpe notes how this photograph “echoed the photographs of that disaster, and disastrous response to, Hurricane Katrina on the US Gulf Coast in 2005” (44). Here again, we have the idea presented in the Introduction that

Katrina has become this metaphorical standard for disaster, particularly with disaster as it affects people and spaces of color.

This echoing goes beyond simply a Haiti earthquake-Hurricane Katrina connection. Sharpe sees in this girl what I see in Hushpuppy and Esch: an individual with the power to become more than just herself, to hold more meaning for others. As Sharpe thinks about this girl in the photograph, who had a piece of tape across her forehead that read “Ship,” she thinks about that word *ship*, its relation to the wake and to the historical memory of black bodies, particularly linking the present with the ships of slave traders. This girl in the photograph “is not a *particular* ship/girl...but *any* ship/child/girl; the part for the whole” (53). Esch and Hushpuppy are, also, the part for the whole; their experience in Katrina or Katrina-like storms, respectively, is similarly experienced by other people before, during, and after Katrina, “and they are evocative of other contemporary girls, as they, too, are mis/seen and all too often un/accounted for” (Sharpe 51). In the context of Post-Katrina literatures, I would expand this beyond just contemporary girls to have the characters in Katrina texts also become evocations of all of those mis/seen and un/accounted for communities and people, whose experiences during and after Katrina were shaped by historical moments, experiences, and identities that reached far beyond the immediate events of the storm itself.

Esch uses other people’s stories, some real and some fictitious, throughout the novel as she tries to make sense of her own present experiences. Typically, these stories come from two primary sources: her mother and the mythology book she is working through. As far as her mother is concerned, this familial historical reference matches work in previous chapters relating especially to the role that witnessing played during and

after Katrina, and the role that it plays in general, as a mode of sharing critically to make sense of tragedy. Often, it takes time for these memories and stories to make sense, until they come through as epiphanies of sorts. Shoshana Felman describes this as how “testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge..., events in excess of our frames of reference” (Felman and Laub 5). Esch has these bits and pieces of memory, the testimony of her mother and of mythology, but she has no frame of reference for them yet. It is only after she becomes pregnant, while also dealing with the coming storm, that many of these fragments start to form and take shape for her. The ways that they take shape become Esch’s testimony. The realizations and connections that she makes become for the reader a way to more deeply and critically become aware of the issues that poor people of color faced before and after Katrina, and are still facing today.

In linking this with my arguments from the Introduction relating to the levee myth and the importance of storytelling and testimony for making sense of the present, we can see how *Salvage the Bones* again reproduces an important component of the pantemporal event-space. Mary Ruth Marotte argues, “Ward wants us to see the connection between the sense of desperation that the contemporary African American on the gulf coast experiences and that of the plantation slave” (210). For them, the past is the present. Unfortunately, it still affects them to this day. It is a continuous present, and Ward’s novel, much like Katrina itself, is a reminder of that repeating tragedy for those people adversely affected by slavery, by reconstruction, by Jim Crow, by police violence, by natural disasters.

## Testimony and the Novel

Over the remainder of this chapter, I am going to be looking at how *Salvage the Bones* “uses” the testimony and personal experience of those who survived Hurricane Katrina and shared those experiences in response to the disaster event of Katrina. To clarify, I am not arguing that Jesmyn Ward specifically read and examined the interviews and testimonies that I am sharing here; rather, I am arguing that Post-Katrina literature, and the pantemporality of the event, allows the experiences of others to merge and overlap, so that wherever we look within the stories found in Post-Katrina literatures, a testimonial example of similar experiences can easily be found. That being said, Ward herself is a Hurricane Katrina survivor, and parts of *Salvage the Bones* are certainly built around her and her family’s experience, or what Felman and Laub might see as a rethinking or translation between history and story. They explain that “issues of biography and history are [not] simply represented..., but are reinscribed, translated, radically rethought and fundamentally worked over by the text” (xiv-xv). For fictional stories that utilize testimonials as a foundation, this translation functions as a way of understanding the politics, history, and culture that is so important to the ways these texts share with the reader and ask them to gain something more from the story. As I explore this idea over the remainder of this chapter, I will utilize an essay from *Oxford American* in which Ward retells her specific story, as well as testimonies from the *Saddest Days* interview collection. Looking at these will demonstrate this convergence of storytelling and testimony represented and utilized by Post-Katrina literature.

The idea of preparedness contains two elements, and I will be looking at both in detail over this next section. The first idea is what I have been referring to so far: the way

that inequality manifests itself in one's ability to successfully prepare for a major storm like Hurricane Katrina. In other words, as has been stated, Hurricane Katrina did not discriminate; everyone who lived in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast was affected. However, poor communities of color not only had to deal with the hurricane, but they also had to deal with the disaster event Katrina afterwards, while simultaneously also dealing with the daily inequalities they would have been experiencing even if the storm had not hit. The continuous nature of this experience closely relates to what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence," or "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). The second concept will deal with the "normalcy" of preparing: the ways that preparation, mirroring concepts of Timothy Cresswell and Sarah Ahmed, among others, becomes in itself a reproduction of the unconscious, taken-for-granted aspects of cultural inequalities. Many testimonies, which includes *Salvage the Bones* as testimonial literature, share sentiments about the way that preparing becomes a "routine." I will be using this comparison to show how that routine of preparing for disaster might in some ways also work in ways similar to those sociocultural norms that Cresswell and Ahmed critique.

"Brown Sugar," a pseudonym for an interviewee from the *Saddest Days* collection, is one individual whose testimony explores the idea of routine, specifically how, for people in the Gulf Coast and New Orleans, hurricanes are just a part of life that people have to deal with. Her interview contains this interaction:

Q: *When did you first hear that the hurricane was coming?*

"Brown Sugar": They were talking about it, probably Tuesday, Wednesday?

Q: *So you were already aware from early on?*

“Brown Sugar”: Oh, yeah... And we just didn’t know the direction. The thing is, you’ve got to decide whether you leave or not. There’s many hurricanes that have been coming this way but you wait till the last minute.

Q: *Why? Is it because it’s expensive to evacuate or disruptive or?*

“Brown Sugar”: It’s just so disruptive. It’s so much trouble, the traffic’s heavy, and then the thing turns the other way and you didn’t have to leave anyway. (38-9)

Here, Brown Sugar’s story both mirrors and shifts slightly from what we find in *Salvage the Bones*. In the novel, Esch and her family have access to *some* information, but it often comes across through jumbled and broken TV and radio signals. Esch’s father, wanting to watch the news reports on and get an update on Hurricane Katrina, asks Esch to “Play with the antenna” (Ward 133). Here we are given an example of the difficulty of receiving information related to coming disasters and, as a result, being able to plan accordingly. The novel continues:

There is only static. I grab the right antenna, yank it up.

...

“*Katrina has made land fall in Florida ... Miles from Miami.*” It is the local news. The weatherwoman is speaking with the anchor, and she is pointing at the interactive screen before her, but the television is so old and the resolution so bad that the map looks like concrete, and the storm, an oil stain.

*“Early reports say that there are some dead. Does anyone ... idea of where ... projection of the storm?”* Mike’s voice is even, smooth, when we catch it through the static.

*“... unclear. The storm is currently a category one ... could weaken ... could change.”* The woman’s hair is light; she may be blonde.

*“So what would you advise our listeners to ... Rachel?”* The TV gives a static moan, so I split the two parts of the antenna further.

*“... prepare as well as they can for the storm. Katrina is on the ... if it does not weaken ... moving northwest, they should also prepare ... government will issue orders for mandatory evacuation.”* (Ward 134-35, emphasis mine).

The news report continues for several more paragraphs with more of the same broken text. The only ellipse that I added to the above quote is the first one, removing two paragraphs of brief conversation between Esch and her father as Esch starts to play with the antenna. The remaining ellipses found within the italicized quotes from the news report are all as they appear in the novel. Again, *Salvage the Bones* is using absence to help the reader recognize and make sense of the social and cultural implications of Hurricane Katrina, particularly in poor communities of color having access to information in order to be as prepared as possible. In this instance that absence comes through the Batiste’s old television, an appliance that still requires an antenna to receive channels, and represents an absence of basic information that is imperative for survival. Most of us in the United States take our access to information for granted, as we live in communities that typically allow us easy access to it. This access to information, while not specifically a part of a space’s infrastructure, can still be read in similar ways when



that access is limited or non-existent. As Stephen Graham explains in the preface to *Disrupted Cities*, “It is one of the great paradoxes of urban life...that it often requires the collapse of...infrastructures that sustain the city...for their critical importance to become manifest” (xi). In other words, infrastructure is one of those concepts that goes largely unnoticed by most of us in our day-to-day lives. Most do not worry about where their electricity, gas, or water is coming from, or where their waste is going, yet the moment our power goes out, or our plumbing becomes jammed, these issues often cause us to react to them even stronger.

This hidden nature of infrastructure is closely aligned with Cresswell’s concept of the hidden structures of society that allow exploitative, hegemonic ideologies to continue unchecked, or with Ahmed’s concept of the familiar, which I explain in more detail below. What is interesting about these two concepts—ideology and infrastructure—connecting is the ways that the hiddenness is something that those most adversely affected by them deal with daily. Graham explains, “Western urban culture...has often displayed a tendency for the technological circuits of cities to be rendered culturally more invisible—at least to powerful or hegemonic users—as their use has become progressively normalized” (6). Ideology and infrastructure are not concepts that are hidden to underprivileged individuals and communities most of the time, but are rather things that people with privilege are able to better ignore. Poor communities of color typically have worse access to basic infrastructure, even *before* a hurricane has disrupted those services, and exploitative ideologies affect other elements of how they are treated during the “normal” moments of their lives.

Similarly, it is, I would think, hard for most of us to believe that, even slightly over a decade ago, there were still people using TVs with antennas, yet that privileged position can help explain many of the outsider responses to the storm, responses ranging from shock to blame. Because those in privileged positions are so used to seeing and having access to a variety of infrastructures, including “functional alternative[s] to relying on the networked infrastructure,” it can be hard to realize that there are people who rely on singular forms (or no form, in some instances), making the variety “so utterly ubiquitous...that these apparently banal artifacts give no hint to the average use of the huge...infrastructural complexes that invisibly sustain them” (Graham 6). What is seen as “normal” is seen as having infrastructure, including a variety of sources, yet when Katrina revealed this difference in infrastructure systems and access, some felt shocked that there were still people forced to live in such underprivileged situations, while others ignored the situation that these communities and individuals were facing before the storm, and simply blamed them for not evacuating or better preparing for the storm. Both of those responses come from a place of privilege, even as the former is, perhaps, a more productive use of it. As this section of *Salvage the Bones* that gives the TV report, and the testimony of “Brown Sugar” and others helps us see, the reality of the situation for most of these people was neither ideal for preparedness nor evacuation. The reality of their situation is not ideal for a society in which they are denied or limited basic human rights before a disaster event, let alone during and after one.

It is unclear where specifically “Brown Sugar” is receiving her information about the storm, but as Spence, et al. argue, there is a good chance that it is, at least partially, gathered through her community. Their article, “Crisis Communication, Race, and

Natural Disasters” relates a study the authors did to try to understand “the process by which racial minorities in the flood area prepared for the crisis and their willingness to evacuate the area” (540). They explain that distrust of government and media are often a factor in decision making for people of color, so “minorities are less likely to accept a risk or warning message as credible without confirmation...from others (specifically interpersonal networks)” (Spence, et al. 544). This interpersonal information was cited as a significantly higher source of disaster preparation information for people of color than it was for White respondents to the authors’ survey (547). This communication mirrors arguments I made in the Introduction, specifically as I was looking at the myth building that occurred during and after Hurricane Katrina related to the blown levees. This myth was constructed out of a real, historical memory of treatment by government and society. This interpersonal network of disaster communication is similarly constructed out of that sociohistorical memory of exploitation and mistreatment of past generations.

Additionally, the testimony of “Brown Sugar” from above also specifically addresses the economic impacts of storm preparation. For poorer members of a community, the decision to evacuate is something that happens last minute (or not at all, in the case of *Salvage the Bones* and some Hurricane Katrina survivors), because the costs associated with evacuation are something those poorer families were ill equipped to handle.

This too coincides with Ward’s use of present continuous verb tense, and my earlier arguments of what that means to the novel, to its representation of pantemporal event-space, and to Post-Katrina literature more generally, particularly in how it represents that pantemporally as being “in the wake” to use Sharpe’s phrase. Earlier in this chapter I gave a quote from *Salvage the Bones* in which Esch talked about how

hurricanes were always expected in the summer. As that quote continues, she explains how each storm “pushes its way through the flat Gulf to the twenty-six-mile manmade Mississippi beach, *where they knock against the old summer mansions with their slave galleys turned guesthouses* before running over the bayou...” (Ward 4, emphasis mine). Here, Esch explains the mundane nature of hurricane season on the Gulf Coast, but in her description she explicitly links that mundanity to historical slavery. This pantemporal moment not only speaks to Esch’s (continuous) present and the rote experience that hurricane season has become, but it also speaks to the rote nature that the history of slavery has become. Former plantations have slave galleys that have become something else, and that shift in spatial identity allows that history to be ignored. That history is no longer confronted; it gets painted over and changed into something more tolerable, which allows hegemonic ideology to never truly confront how the complex history of slavery still plays a role in the present moment, from the treatment of marginalized groups to the privilege that others experience. When Esch continues, “We ain’t had one come straight for us in years, time enough to forget how many jugs of water we need to fill, how many cans of sardines and potted meat we should stock, how many tubs of water we need,” she reinforces how no longer being confronted with something can allow us to become comfortable with how things are, to what Ahmed might refer to as “familiarity.” Ahmed explains how our familiarity with objects establishes our relationship and familiarity to each other and to the space that houses those objects and us. This familiarity is also inherited, continually reinforcing where objects and people belong and behave (155). The familiarity of hurricane season for people of color is marked by expected behaviors, but

those expectations are in turn constructed through the availability of resources to (in)effectively prepare.

The community of the Pit, too, in line with Spence et al.'s analysis of preparedness communication, relies on previous hurricane experience and members of the community in order to shape their approach to preparation. In one moment, Randall's best friend Big Henry comes around as the Batiste's are in the middle of preparing for the storm, and he asks Esch's father, "What y'all did to get ready for them hurricanes today, Mr. Claude?" (Ward 26-7). What is interesting about this moment is that Esch never tells the reader how or if her father responded to Big Henry. Because of this, the question serves two purposes related to communicating preparations: first, it can be read as advice seeking, that Big Henry could be wondering what the Batiste's have done, and how it might compare to his own family's; second, it can be read empathetically, that Big Henry is asking out of genuine concern for the Batiste's. This reliance on community for preparing for a storm becomes poetic in this way. On the one hand, it is based on the mistrust that Spence, et al. discuss in their essay, and so certainly has some negative connotations; on the other hand, it is built first and foremost on that sense of community and togetherness that keeps these communities strong when faced with adversity, and so becomes a beacon of light in those moments. Big Henry is this presence throughout the novel, serving as that member of the Batiste's community who is always there to lend a hand, not just in preparing for the hurricane, but also in the day-to-day issues that the family faces, from needing a ride to the store to helping out after Esch's dad loses his fingers while preparing for the storm, among others. The fact that the Batiste's are forced to deal with other issues while also being expected to prepare for a hurricane is an

important concept, particularly when thinking about how inequalities factor in, something that I will discuss momentarily.

Before I shift into that discussion of how regional Hurricane Katrina preparation (or preparation for any storm, for that matter) had inequality built into it, I want to take a moment to briefly to clarify something that Katrina and its literatures reveal related to what it means to be a victim/survivor, and, perhaps, what connotations come along with that label. Oftentimes, when someone thinks of victims or survivors, it might come across as people who were unable to care for or protect themselves. There is often a negative connotation associated with it, one that ignores the strength involved with actually surviving this way. While I do not want to go so far as to say that poor communities in the Gulf Coast, especially those primarily comprised of people of color, were, in some ways, better prepared to survive the storm, I think it is certainly worth thinking about, simply because they are often forced to actually hunker down and *survive* them compared to their more well-off counterparts. This is perhaps partially because the privilege of those counterparts prior to Katrina often shielded those groups from having to deal with these extreme traumas, whereas underprivileged citizens are/were confronted with other forms of “disaster” daily, and so they are, in some ways, better able to cope when presented with more extreme forms like major disaster events. Historically, these underprivileged communities were more likely to have to stay and hunker down through a storm, rather than have the ability to evacuate. As Wayne De Gruy explains in his *Saddest Days* interview, “It was a mandatory evacuation. We were supposed to leave. There were people that couldn’t leave. I was one that couldn’t leave... They didn’t have nobody to get us to come pick us up to get us out. The only thing they was telling me to

leave” (2). This ability to effectively prepare and/or evacuate has multiple components to it, including the development of “standardized” preparation techniques, the ability to prevent loss, and the ability to replace that which was, in fact, lost, not to mention the demonization that was later placed upon these people for not leaving. I will unpack each of these components over the next several paragraphs, while looking at how they appear in both *Salvage the Bones* and testimonial narratives.

The first element of this inequality of preparation deals with the standardization of preparation, with the sharing and developing of the best ways to be prepared when the means to be most prepared are unavailable. “Brown Sugar,” again, speaks directly to this when she explains how “there’s a technique to all of this” (40). In *Salvage the Bones*, this technique is represented almost like a mantra as the family works on final preparations for the hurricane. Over the course of six paragraphs in Chapter Nine, these preparations, dictated by Esch’s father, are inserted, mantra-like, to introduce each of those six paragraphs: “*Cover the windows.... Bring the jugs of water in.... Fill my gas tank.... Cook whatever’s in the ‘frigerator.... Park my truck in the clearing by the pit.... Get the cheapest you can get*” (Ward 187-90). The way that these are presented so nonchalantly, implying these are phrases ingrained in Esch’s family repertoire, reinforces this concept of routine preparedness, one forced upon and practiced because of economic inequality. Parallels to these quick phrases are found in Ward’s essay in *Oxford American*. She writes,

On the Gulf Coast, we were used to facing at least one hurricane every year, sometimes more. We filled bottles with water for drinking, filled the bathtub with

water so we'd have some to flush the toilets and bathe in, stocked up on canned goods and gas lanterns and batteries and flashlights. ("We Do Not Swim" 34)

These mantras, repeated preparatory practices and phrases, also mirror my earlier arguments about the temporality of this novel, particularly its choice of verb tense, in that the routine of preparing for a hurricane is simultaneously something that has occurred previously and is presently occurring (and will, unless the cycle can be broken, happen again in the future). As Ward herself points out, people in the Gulf Coast experience at least one hurricane per year, though, as I will discuss in the Afterword to this dissertation those numbers are increasing, while the hurricanes themselves also increase in intensity. What is not increasing, however, are practices and programs ensuring that our most vulnerable citizens are able to become more prepared in the future. One simply needs to look at the recent experiences of Puerto Rican citizens for proof of this.

Chad Charles discusses his experience before the storm slightly differently, explaining how he was with his friends and, "weren't really taking it too serious, cause [sic] most of the time when they have hurricanes in New Orleans they mostly miss or they mostly turn north, so nobody was really taking it too serious" (2). Even Ward herself writes, "My family prepared for Katrina like any other hurricane. We never evacuated so we didn't evacuate this time. For one thing, we couldn't afford to leave" ("We Do Not Swim" 34). Missing from Charles' account at this point is any mention of this casual attitude relating to specifics of economics, though it is clearly stated in Ward's account. Later in the interview, however, Charles says,

A hurricane be the last thing on my mind that was going to come through and devastate the city and you know really devastate me... You know our city's



mostly crime and murders, that is something you be worried about. Getting away from that, you know, finding a way away from that or avoiding that... A hurricane people really underestimated that, well people in poverty. (Charles 5)

In other words, it is not that a hurricane is not necessarily an immediate threat for these people and communities, but it is not the only threat they have to deal with, nor is it the one that is, perhaps, at the forefront of their minds. I would argue that some combination of factors, all related to poverty, are what caused families to either not evacuate or be incapable of evacuating, and they are both closely related to their lives on a day when there *is not* a storm to deal with as well. Mary Ruth Marotte shared a similar sentiment in “Pregnancies, Storms, and Legacies of Loss in Jesmyn Ward’s *Salvage the Bones*” when she argues for the way that “Ward gives a sense of the hesitancy with which the Baptistes [sic] live when she demonstrates how disaster is a way of life for them—responding to it, grappling with it, emerging out of it” (209). For the Batistes, these additional daily worries include(d)<sup>18</sup> Esch’s pregnancy, Randall’s need of a basketball scholarship, Skeetah trying to take care of China and her puppies, and Daddy trying to take care of four kids as a single parent. Every single one of these issues are closely, if not intrinsically, tied to the family’s financial situation: Esch’s future school, job, and career prospects as a teenage mother; Randall needing the basketball scholarship if he hopes to go to college; Skeetah hoping to sell off the puppies. Again, these are all problems that the family is dealing with before the storm has even arrived. It is understandable that, to paraphrase Chad Charles’ words, Hurricane Katrina was the last thing on their mind.

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<sup>18</sup> Again, the story has happened, but also is happening.

The next of these concepts deals with one's ability to prevent loss and/or replace that which was lost. Again, both of these concepts are related to a family or individuals access to the means with which to prevent or recoup, but I want to focus on ways that people, in testimonies and the characters in *Salvage the Bones*, specifically went about preparing this. This loss can also be read as both material and metaphorical. The Batistes lose their home and other material objects, but throughout the novel, Esch is also dealing with the loss and absence of her mother, an absence that is "profound and evidenced in the specific and oftentimes misguided ways the family members seek comfort" (Marotte 208). Most of the testimonies will link closely with the Batistes experience, yet what is interesting is also how those who shared their testimonies were aware of the differences between their own experience of preparedness reflected through those who were able to be better prepared. This reflection is closely linked to the revelatory nature of Hurricane Katrina and the ways it served as a transgressive event.

Lastly, I want to look at how Hurricane Katrina survivors' inequality of preparedness caused them, in some instances, to become demonized or shamed for their inaction. While *Salvage the Bones* does not directly address this, because the novel ends the day after Hurricane Katrina hit and therefore does not discuss responses to the storm, the use of historical reference in the novel and the cyclical nature of its verb tense implications allow us to link the responses of testimony to moments *Salvage the Bones* addresses similar concepts. It is almost as if Esch's narration is foreshadowing the responses to Katrina, though, temporally, it would not be possible for her to do so, since the storm has not occurred for her yet.

Again, this reinforces the pantemporal elements of *Salvage the Bones*, and those of *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, as Esch is a narrator that exists both within and outside of a normal temporal reality. Another way of thinking about this temporal reality would be to bring Ahmed's familiarity to it. That normal temporal experience is what we expect to experience. In linking this familiarity to race, and whiteness specifically, Ahmed explains how describing "whiteness as habit...is to suggest that whiteness is what bodies do" (156). Therefore, normal temporal experience is what is socially constructed as "white" temporality. Bringing this into the larger contexts of Katrina, particularly with media framings of those who either could or chose not to evacuate, we can see how those individuals are now marked as failing to behave according to the "norm," and are thus demonized. "Normal" behaviors before a storm would be effectively preparing and/or evacuating according to what white bodies, or the access to resources that white communities typically have, might be able to do, and how efficiently they are able to do so. That efficiency also contains an element of temporality, depending on how quickly one is able to prepare or evacuate. Those who are unable to do so are set up in opposition to that expected, white temporal experience, and are viewed by society in the same negative way that others who step outside of those expectations, either intentionally or unintentionally, would be. Ahmed writes, "Bodies stand out when they are out of place. Such standing re-confirms the whiteness of the space.... The effect of repetition... is not simply a matter of how many bodies are 'in.' Rather, what is repeated is a very style of embodiment, a way of inhabiting space" (159). Not only does this preparation behavior demonize those individuals and communities who were unable to effectively prepare, but

it also reinforces their “out-of-place-ness” as a result, by re-strengthening the ideological structures that set them in that position in the first place.

This space that both Esch and Hushpuppy (and other Katrina survivors, both real and imagined) inhabit mirrors what Dori Laub explains as a traumatic event existing outside of normal reality, “such as causality, sequence, place and time. The trauma is thus an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during, no after” (Felman and Laub 69). Through literary works, this pantemporal space can more easily be shown and represented, whether through the practical effects of *Beasts of the Southern Wild* or the verb tense used in *Salvage the Bones*, or even the multiple character narrative structure found in *Treme* that I will discuss in the next chapter. That said, actual, lived survivors and their testimonies also inhabit this pantemporal space as well. These come through in the myth building I discussed in the Introduction, through their use of history and memory to reflect on present events, and the way they relate the awareness of their position within that history and memory to those who would listen to their testimony.

This sharing of traumatic testimony also comes through in an interesting way in Shriff Hasan’s interviews from *Saddest Days*, in that Hasan’s retelling also takes a day-by-day approach similar to Ward’s/Esch’s in *Salvage the Bones*. In addition to commenting on the ways that he and his community were dealing with other problems that seemed more pressing than the coming storm, Hasan’s interview also contains moments peppered throughout where he has to pause and ask the interviewer what day he is on in his story. For Hasan, his present concerns were related to working on his old high school and trying “to improve it.... You know we were trying to say to the world that we were not going to allow anybody to take our school over, state or otherwise” (Hasan 2).

Just after that, he explains how he “was really just catching up on being behind, because [he] had a niece that tragically lost her life the week before in a car accident” (2). Beyond the way that Hasan explains how he was dealing with other issues while preparing for the storm—what he refers to as “the old routine”—it becomes apparent how the storm itself caused time to blur together for him. This interview was recorded on 17 October 2005, a little over a month after Hurricane Katrina. His sense of time, his ability to effectively separate the days of his experience during the storm, bleed together for him as he thinks back on what he did and when. Shoshana Felman’s work in *Testimony* frames this as the ways “testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance” (Felman and Laub 5).

The act of testifying is often cobbled together by, among other things, memory, history, media, and community, and all of the cloudiness that might accompany such a patchwork narrative. This is interesting to think of in conjunction with Ward’s/Esch’s use of the present continuous tense in retelling, for the ways that testimony, in Laub’s words from above, can exist outside of the normal temporality of beginning, middle, end. As I will show, even Katrina testimonies can and do exhibit similar pantemporal properties as their literary counterparts. This is largely due to the fact that the storm itself was, as I argued in the Introduction, a pantemporal event-space that combined and distorted the temporal experience of those who experienced it.

Hasan’s interview responses are full of temporal confusions, contradictions, and uncertainties as the interviewer asks about his experiences during the hurricane. The first instance of this occurs early in the interview, with Hasan discussing what he was doing

prior to Hurricane Katrina in terms of preparation, when he saw Mayor Nagin's mandatory evacuation order. Hasan says, "Saturday night or Sunday. I'm not sure which day it was exactly" (5). As he continues to testify to his experience during and immediately after the storm, filling in the details of what he tried to preserve from his home, what he saw being destroyed, what he noticed in his neighborhood, all of those details are clear and well-explained in the interview. The only places where Hasan seems to be foggy come specifically in those moments he is trying to remember when exactly specific events occurred. This temporal fog is closely related to Hurricane Katrina as a pantemporal event-space. At one point, Hasan has a hard time even remembering when the storm itself hit:

Hasan: ....The storm hit Monday didn't it?

Q: *Yes.*

Hasan: Are you sure it wasn't Sunday evening?

Q: *Wasn't it early Monday morning?*

Hasan: OK good. I'm just thinking, I lost track of time and days. The only one I was aware of was Saturday. (58-9)

Because the storm existed in multiple temporal experiences that included short- and long-term, social and environmental temporalities, an individual within that convergence would have a hard time distinguishing time and experience in order to pinpoint specific events' occurrences after the fact, and Hasan's interview is a perfect example of this convergence and distortion of time.

For Katrina survivors, time was stretched and compressed simultaneously. Small moments during the storm—things Hasan talks about like protecting a computer, securing

identification, taking care of pets—have their temporality clouded. These short activities which most of us could easily infer an amount of time for their completion seem longer and more profound in the pantemporality of Katrina for those who experienced them and are now trying to recollect them. So when Hasan’s interviewer asks him, “That’s about an hour later?” his initial response is one of confusion: “Yes, no, it was not an hour” (7). He immediately clarifies that it was not quite an hour, that most of this experience happened over about a fifteen minute stretch, but his initial response was not as certain, because it took him a moment to reframe his experience inside of the unreality of the event, to use a phrase of Felman’s and Laub’s, into the “real” temporality of those outside of it. Later in the interview, Hasan said, “So, it is now Thursday. The days were long, I think” (57). He is aware of the way that a fixed, short-term time unit (a day) can expand outward and feel as if it was much longer.

Allen Bluedorn explains the manner with which short and long term temporal experiences collapse into parallel experiences, as he discusses the concept of entrainment. Entrainment, Bluedorn argues, is the way that rhythmic patterns of time are able to align with one another and then work in a similar manner. In other words, entrainment partially explains the pantemporal event-space at work, but most specifically for the ways that temporal experience gets clouded. For Hasan and other Katrina survivors, time experienced doing simple tasks during the storm overpowers the way that time is experienced doing those same tasks at other, more mundane times. Bluedorn explains, “[T]he less powerful rhythm is captured and adjusts to the rhythm of the more powerful” (147). These mundane tasks that normally take no time, or at the very least have so little temporal markings to make them noticeable, now become profound and explosive. Such

temporally insignificant moments seem to last forever when converged with the extraordinary temporal experience of disaster.

A similar experience is true for those who are witnessing the testimony, for those who listen, read, or otherwise come into the shared experience of those who testify. Days bleed together with each other and with the individual moments that make up the days. Hasan's interview is full of interesting moments where the interviewer, while trying to track Hasan's narrative, has to continually ask what day it currently is. Throughout the interview Hasan is describing a breathtaking volume of work and activity that he did during and after the storm, and, because of this volume, it becomes hard to believe that it was all happening over just a few days. Interestingly in these moments, Hasan's temporality becomes less clouded, but the interviewer's becomes more so. For this reason it starts to become clear how time not only becomes disrupted and entrained for the testifier, but it can also become disrupted and entrained for those bearing witness to the testimony. Here the temporal rhythm of those outside of the lived experience (those listening) are pulled into the temporal experience of those who are testifying. This is crucial for understanding Post-Katrina literature, because the texts themselves function in the same way. They are literatures of testimony, reproducing the altered and converged temporal experience, so that the reader is similarly disrupted. A sample of these moments from Hasan's interview:

Q: *Was this Wednesday morning?*

Hasan: Yes. Wednesday morning. (31)

...

Q: *It was still Wednesday?*



Hasan: It was still Wednesday though... (40)

...

Q: *Was this still Wednesday?*

Hasan: This was Wednesday. (53)

...

Hasan: But any way Friday.

Q: *Friday or Saturday?*

Hasan: No, I'm still at Friday. (79)

...

Q: *Where are we now? This is Saturday now, Saturday morning?*

Hasan: This is Saturday morning. (87)

It is worth noting that, for the most part, Hasan's interview is fairly straightforward in its chronology. He does not jump around from day to day, except for maybe once or twice. The interviewer's temporal confusion, then, cannot be attributed to some sort of postmodernist narrative temporality, but is rather in line with the entrained convergence of the event itself. Even this temporal experience of the listener, which also includes readers engaging with written testimony, can be linked back to Dori Laub's work with testimony. Laub, explaining the role of the listener or interviewer to the shared testimony, argues, "There are hazards to the listening to trauma. Trauma—and its impact on the hearer—leaves, indeed, no hiding place intact" (Felman and Laub 72). Laub then proceeds to list some of the responses a listener might have during this act of witnessing a testimony, including paralysis, outrage, withdrawal/numbness, awe and fear, and hyperemotionality. I would, using Bluedorn's concept of entrainment, add a temporal

element to this list as well. As the more powerful temporal narrative of the testifier takes over during testimony, the listener/reader temporal narrative begins to run parallel to it. Yet the listener is also acutely aware of their own temporality in comparison, and the awareness of this disconnect is what is also partially responsible for this shared trauma that Laub explains.

## **Conclusion**

As I close out this chapter, I want to return to *Salvage the Bones* and how it serves as a mirror to this entrainment of time between the testifier and the listener, between the writer and the reader, and to how this is a function of Post-Katrina literature as a whole. I explained the specific pantemporal elements of the novel earlier in this chapter, but I want to focus now on how that temporality parallels with the readers' temporality, and how that parallel also incorporates the sociohistorical cultural commentaries into it as well. After all, the way that I am differentiating my concept of the pantemporal event-space, and how Post-Katrina literatures replicate it, from other concepts like entrainment, being in the wake, or transcorporeality, is primarily for how it bridges all of those things simultaneously. Essentially, I want to summarize this chapter by answering the question, how does *Salvage the Bones* utilize testimony to replicate the pantemporality of Katrina in order to instill a shared experience in the reader?

In reading the novel, the reader is pulled into the more powerful temporality of *Salvage the Bones*. While a reader would certainly have a choice to read one chapter per day, thus bringing their own personal temporality more closely in line with Esch's, it is never going to be a perfect overlap. No matter how slowly someone might read, it would never take a full day to read a chapter. On the other hand, someone could read the whole

book in one day, or, at the very least, several chapters. This in and of itself is not enough to cause the temporality of the novel to entrain the temporality of the reader. In fact, I would argue, this is actually the reader's temporality enacting its power on the novel: we dictate how long the experience takes in our own time. Where the novel is able to more fully entrain the reader comes through its use of present continuous tense. Regardless of how much we try to control the temporality of our reading experience, the novel is always going to be in that state of perpetual occurrence. It resists entrainment, and this, in some ways, helps instill those "hazards to the listening" that Laub discusses. The event itself is beyond our control, even as we might seek to control it. The novel becomes a *zeitgeber*, a concept that in relation to entrainment, "is often used in the sense of a pacing agent or synchronizer" (Bluedorn 150). The testimony unfolds in its own temporal space, one that we are forced into, so in listening, we "can no longer ignore the question of facing death; of *facing time and its passage*; of the meaning and purpose of living; of *the limits of one's omnipotence*," among other things (Felman and Laub 72, emphasis mine). The reminder of how little control we have, particularly in the wake of natural disasters, can be traumatic to us for the ways Laub described—paralysis, outrage, withdrawal, etc.—and *Salvage the Bones*, at least partially, enacts this through the present continuous tense. As readers we become aware that this event has occurred, is occurring, and will occur again, and the tragedy of it unfolding in that circular manner instills that trauma for us.

Additionally, the novel and its pantemporality must incorporate the particular cultural criticisms into that time-space. These cultural criticisms are closely tied to history and memory, both within Esch's family as well as the larger cultural history and

shared memory she uses to make sense of her present circumstances. These moments are, themselves, pantemporal, in that they follow “in the wake,” to return to Sharpe’s concept. What has happened for African Americans in the United States is made constantly aware for them within their present lived experience as well, both through their own testifying, but also from outside hegemonic forces and ideologies dictating how they should live and behave. As Shoshana Felman argues, “The ‘literature of testimony’ is thus not an art of leisure but an art of urgency: it exists *in time* not just as memorial but as an artistic promissory note, as an attempt to bring the ‘backwardness’ of consciousness to the level of precipitant events” (Felman and Laub 114). The stories that function with and/or utilize characteristics of testimony are using for action, and, I would argue, *activism*. The testimony, the trauma, the temporal entrainment, all exist as modes for critiquing the issues the testimony calls attention to, whether those are historical issues presently affecting exploited communities or present issues that will affect those communities in the future.

In *Salvage the Bones*, Ward is concerned with poverty, race, spatial identity, and the repetitive nature of history and its continually adverse effects on people of color. As a result of this pantemporality found within *Salvage the Bones*, we are able to see the interplay between all of these converging concepts of time, culture, and nature. Of course, Post-Katrina literature as part of a larger body of critical work related to Katrina and the issues that arose in its wake, is primarily concerned with issues of race and environment. By embracing testimonial narrative techniques in its exploration of these themes, it is better able to instill the trauma Laub calls for in the reader, thereby attempting to move the reader to action by replicating that experience of the continuous

cycle and working to disrupt and break it. Ward finishes *Salvage the Bones* with Esch bringing together all of these concepts of memory, mythology, and testimony I have been examining as a call to arms, a learning experience:

I will tie the glass and stone with string, hang the shards above my bed, so that they will flash in the dark and tell the story of Katrina, the mother that swept into the Gulf and slaughtered. Her chariot was a storm so great and black the Greeks would say it was harnessed to dragons. She was the murderous mother who cut us to the bone but left us alive, left us naked and bewildered as wrinkled newborn babies, as blind puppies, as sun-starved newly hatched baby snakes. She left us a dark Gulf and salt-burned land. She left us to learn to crawl. She left us to salvage. Katrina is the mother we will remember until the next mother with large, merciless hands, committed to blood, comes. (Ward 255)

Esch is both hopeful and weary, understanding that we learned something from Katrina, something that was tied directly to past injustice. There is something we can learn from and change about culture and ideology as a result, so that, perhaps, the next mother with merciless hands might not hurt its children so badly.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### REBUILDING TAKES TIME:

#### *TREME* AND THE LONG-EVENT KATRINA

As I move forward into this final chapter, I also want to move my focus forward to after the storm itself. While *Beasts of the Southern Wild* and *Salvage the Bones* both situated themselves within the immediate temporality of the storm, neither of those texts spent much time reckoning with the longer-lasting effects of Hurricane Katrina. *Beasts* explored a few weeks of time surrounding its fictional storm, and *Salvage the Bones* only related the day following Hurricane Katrina. The text that I explore in this chapter, the HBO television series *Treme*, takes place entirely after the storm, starting three months after Hurricane Katrina, roughly November 2005, and continuing until right after Mardi Gras in 2008. The final episode of the first season is the only one that spends any time visually showing what happened to the characters during the hurricane, and the rest of the four-season run is temporally after the storm. In essence, Katrina is a ghost throughout the series, always there in the background, ever present, but never seen. But its impacts are still felt, recalling Christina Sharpe's notion of the wake. Hurricane Katrina is "one version of one part of a more than four-hundred-year-long event" (Sharpe 37).

The effects of Katrina, which are still present even today in mid-2018 with many areas not fully rebuilt, must also be considered within the longer history of racial, environmental, and economic exploitation that lead to its destructive impact. The ways that *Treme* portrays these lasting effects on its characters' experiences are interesting when considering the racial and spatial differences between them. Even though both white characters and characters of color have essentially experienced the same event—

Hurricane Katrina—the long event of Katrina complicates those experiences differently. *Treme*, following the trajectory of Post-Katrina literature that I have laid out in this dissertation, shows those complications through its focus on concepts of racial and environmental privilege, its unique ability to replicate the pantemporality of Post-Katrina life, and finally through its utilization of testimonial voices and their concerns over Katrina’s relationship to governmental and cultural exploitation of underprivileged groups and communities.

I should note here that *Treme* provided the most difficulty for me in this dissertation, especially in relation to the section detailing how it utilizes testimony, because of the show’s own limitations and issues. As a result, much of that section is written in a way to help situate the reader through my process of working through these complications. In some instances, I worry that it might appear as if I am contradicting myself or defending the show’s issues, but I try to do my best to signal these moments as me working through those contradictions. *Treme* complicates the analysis I have been doing throughout this dissertation in that it somewhat erases or lessens the voices of those Katrina survivors who were already marginalized, and instead delivers their testimony through white characters. The show, especially in earlier seasons and episodes, places many of its characters of color in more supportive roles, and the major themes of race and environmental justice that Post-Katrina literature is concerned with come through the white characters voices and actions. In addition, those white characters who deliver the testimonial themes in *Treme* are highly problematic, even as they embody particular progressive politics. As a result, *Treme* is a text that technically meets the requirements I

have been arguing for in this dissertation, although how it meets them is complicated and somewhat problematic.

As stated above, *Treme* ran for four seasons on HBO. Created by David Simon and Eric Overmyer, who previously worked together on *Homicide: Life on the Streets* and *The Wire*, the show focuses on a diverse cast of characters whose stories exist separately in the narrative, although they converge often throughout the run, and this narrative convergence is something I will explore in a later section of this chapter. The primary cast is made up of fourteen core characters, with many recurring characters on top of those. Antoinette “Toni” Bernette (Melissa Leo), a civil rights lawyer that works on several cases throughout the show, while she and her daughter Sofia (India Ennenga) also deal with the suicide of Creighton “Cray” (John Goodman) that occurs at the end of Season One. LaDonna Batiste-Williams (Khandi Alexander) owns a bar in New Orleans that took some damage during the storm, but she splits her time between there and Baton Rouge with her husband and two children, whose father is her ex-husband Antoine Batiste (Wendell Pierce), a trombone player struggling to find regular gigs and provide for his girlfriend and youngest child. Delmond Lambreaux (Rob Brown) is an accomplished jazz trumpeter, who spends a lot of his time in New York City, and has a complex, sometimes strained relationship with his father, Albert “Big Chief” (Clarke Peters), a well-respected Mardi Gras Indian who struggles to rebuild and reconcile in Post-Katrina New Orleans. Also spending a great deal of time in New York City is chef Janette Desautel (Kim Dickens). Her restaurant struggled to stay afloat after Katrina, so she ended up abandoning it to work in New York City, though her longing for New Orleans is a major thread for her character throughout the series. In the first season, she



has an on-and-off relationship with Davis McAlary (Steve Zahn), a part-time DJ, musician, and activist, who is constantly railing against injustices in between waxing poetic about New Orleans music and culture. When Davis and Janette split, Davis eventually finds himself in a relationship with a violinist named Annie Talarico (Lucia Micarelli), who plays gigs all around New Orleans while struggling to find her role in an already crowded music scene. Early on, Annie busks on the streets with her then-boyfriend Sonny (Michiel Huisman), until their relationship breaks down over his drug and alcohol use. Sonny's struggle with getting and staying clean, while holding down work and being a musician, are the major focuses for his character. Finally, *Treme* includes Terry Colson (David Morse) as a New Orleans police lieutenant and friend of Toni's, who works to investigate police corruption in the city, Nelson Hidalgo (Jon Seda), a real estate developer from Dallas who comes to the city to take advantage of the rebuilding efforts in order to turn a profit, and L.P. Everett (Chris Coy), a reporter for ProPublica who is in New Orleans investigating crimes that took place during Katrina. Of these fourteen characters, twelve have arcs that run the course of all four seasons, with only John Goodman and Chris Coy's characters spanning one season.<sup>19</sup> Again, this list is only the *primary* characters for the show, and does not include recurring characters, who intersect with all of these characters and have their own minor storylines. Looking at this list, and the sheer number of characters and storylines, it is pretty clear I could spend an entire book focused on this show alone.<sup>20</sup>

This chapter will follow a similar structure to Chapter Three, as I will break it down into three sub-sections, each dealing with a particular aspect of how I argue Post-

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<sup>19</sup> Coy's character arc technically spans two seasons, but he only makes a brief appearance in Season Four, so it's still a significantly shorter run than the other twelve core members have.

<sup>20</sup> Which I hope to do as a follow-up to, and expansion of, this dissertation.

Katrina literatures should be read and analyzed. To refresh, these are (1) the texts' primary concerns of racial and environmental themes, (2) the ways the texts reproduce the pantemporal event-space, and (3) how the texts reflect on, and in some instances, utilize the testimonial narratives of actual Hurricane Katrina survivors. In the first section, which deals with *Treme*'s racial and environmental thematic elements, I will be looking at how *Treme* handles aspects of privilege associated with race and space. I will do so by first focusing on the character of Davis McAlary's white privilege, as I then move into a discussion of how the show establishes concepts of spatial privilege, both visually and narratively. Davis is an interesting character for thinking about privilege, because he is constantly portrayed as simultaneously "woke" and incredibly un-self-aware. His behaviors as an activist and musician throughout the show give us a portrayal of white privilege as it is not often seen, in that he is a character who is, on the one hand, trying to work to overcome issues of race and class within New Orleans, yet he fails to see his own complicity in those systemic structures. After looking at Davis, I will explore how *Treme* uses editing to link scenes and storylines together in order to juxtapose the differences in rebuilding and reconstruction post-Katrina between upper and middle class families and those of poor people of color. These juxtapositions reinforce my argument about the significant differences between the storm Hurricane Katrina and the long-event of Katrina, which in many ways is still happening, and how those differences affect(ed) particular communities in drastically different ways.

The second section will look at how *Treme*, and television more broadly, is a unique medium for representing the pantemporal event-space. *Treme* is interesting in considering the long event of Katrina for several reasons. The first is the aforementioned

narrative temporality of the show, and how it relates those years following the storm as citizens try to reconcile and rebuild after their experiences. The show itself gives a look at a time span of multiple years after Katrina, and it unfolds slowly just as post-Katrina reconstruction has. The second reason is the production of the show, and its temporal distance from the events it portrays. The show premiered 11 April 2010, four and a half years after Hurricane Katrina, and the final episode aired December 29, 2013. Even as the show took on real events in its narrative, those events had already occurred and the show chose to recreate or incorporate them, but its critical distance allows it to shape the show's narrative around those events, thereby allowing the audience to consider them in particular contexts that might not have been known to them when the events originally took place. The final reason *Treme* and television is unique in its representation of pantemporality is the medium itself. By linking the first two reasons—the show's narrative temporality and its temporal distance from the real-world events—with the format of television, the show allows the viewers to experience a similar temporality as those who lived in the aftermath of Katrina. *Treme* aired its episodes weekly on HBO, with spans of approximately one year between seasons. Unlike films or novels, whose narratives can be digested in their entirety all at once, the viewing of television series released on a weekly basis and as a sequence of discrete seasons requires patience and a time commitment to fully experience the narrative.<sup>21</sup> In other words, the temporal experience of watching the original run of a television series like *Treme* is a slow process that spanned years, mirroring the temporal experience of Post-Katrina recovery, a similarly slow and drawn out process. While a film or a novel could certainly explore this

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<sup>21</sup> I will be taking a more traditional view of television viewing habits, as the majority of *Treme* aired in this traditional format, before the prevalence of on-demand, binge watching. That said, even the process of binge watching the show requires a significant time commitment of over thirty-six hours.

time period after the storm, I will show how a combination of these three factors makes television a perfect medium for doing so.

The final section will look again to the testimonial narratives of Katrina survivors, and how their experiences overlap or are utilized by *Treme*. In this section I will specifically consider Spike Lee's HBO documentaries *When the Levees Broke* and the follow-up *If God is Willing and Da Creek Don't Rise*, along with interviews from the *Saddest Days* collection and *Voices from the Storm: The People of New Orleans on Hurricane Katrina and its Aftermath*. What is interesting about Spike Lee's two documentaries are their overlaps between interviewees and actors from *Treme*. *When the Levees Broke* was produced in August and September 2005, just after the storm, and originally aired in August 2006 near the first anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. Both Wendell Pierce (Antoine Batiste on the show) and Phyllis Montana LeBlanc, who plays Antoine's girlfriend Desiree on *Treme*, were interviewed about their experiences for both of Lee's documentaries. In fact, LeBlanc was cast *because* of her involvement with the first documentary on the recommendation of Lee. Lee's documentaries are primarily concerned with the failure of the government in preventing and responding to the storm, and how Katrina was in some ways a preventable disaster. This theme runs throughout *Treme* as well, particularly in how those decisions had long lasting effects, but also how those in power continued to exploit in the aftermath of the storm. Some of the other interviews from *Saddest Days* also focus on this issue, but of additional importance are those who talk about the way that culture is passed from generation to generation and others that discuss capitalism's role in post-storm New Orleans.

## ***Treme* and White (Spatial) Privilege**

This first section will cover two ways that *Treme* engages with aspects of privilege, one related to race and the other related to space. In the first half of the section I will detail how Davis McAlary is a complicated portrayal of white privilege in post-Katrina New Orleans. To clarify, his complications do not arise in whether or not he is privileged. He is. Instead, the show gives us a way to reflect on the ways that even white members of diverse communities, who consider themselves progressive politically, can fail to recognize their part in systemic racist ideological (re)production, due to the concept of the white savior complex, a phrase coined by Teju Cole in response to online advocacy campaigns like Kony 2012, in which significant human rights issues become memes and fad-like. They are simply a way for white people to perform advocacy in a reactionary way, while not considering or confronting the actual practices and ideologies that drive them. In the second half of this section I will move to a discussion of how *Treme* pairs scenes that set spaces of white characters and spaces of characters of color in opposition to each other, highlighting the ways that recovery and rebuilding for those two communities was often drastically different. In doing so, these comparisons between spaces begin to hint at how the show represents the long, slow recovery for Post-Katrina New Orleans and how the temporality of rebuilding was felt differently for those communities as well.

In *Treme*, nearly all of the white characters in the show are portrayed as, at the very least, left-leaning, if not hard-left liberals, and all of those characters demonstrate privileged behavior over the course of the show. This is, I would argue, another key to how *Treme* handles the idea of white saviorism. Matthew W. Hughey claims, “While

some might argue that such racially charged saviorism is an essentially conservative, postcolonial device that rationalizes right-wing paternalism, I argue that it knows no political boundaries and is pliable to contradictory and seemingly antagonistic agendas” (2). *Treme* does not resort to easy portrayals of conservatives who fail to recognize their privilege. Instead, it gives us progressive individuals throughout. None of these characters is nearly as rich for this discussion as Davis, though. As played by the nearly-always affable Steve Zahn, Davis is equal parts progressive and passionate activist, a struggling and determined musician, a connoisseur of all things New Orleans culture and history, and a loveable buffoon that lacks any sort of self-awareness related to all of those pieces. Michael Bucher explains, “If *Treme*, with its diverse cast, has something like a main character, I would argue it is Davis, who often acts as a guide to the city... He is also, I would say, the most obnoxious character in the series” (87). I must confess that Steve Zahn is one of my favorite actors, so while I do not find him nearly as obnoxious as Bucher, I do agree that he is a problematic character and he by far exhibits the most infuriating behaviors of any of the characters. Whether this problematic arises through his obnoxiousness or through his buffoonery, Davis is a character that complicates the concept of white privilege by behaving in a way that simultaneously presents as progressive activist, but whose actual behavior portrays a character who remains unaware of that privilege in many ways. The majority of the white characters on *Treme* at some point or another demonstrate this white savior complex, but none more so—or more consistently—than Davis, which is why I will focus on his character. He not only represents the white savior complex more, but his character’s inherent unlikeability reinforces this behavior as problematic to viewers as a result.

One of the first indications of Davis's problematic behaviors comes early in the first season. Just after the opening credits of the second episode of the series, we see Toni arriving at a makeshift holding cell, and the camera tracks her movement through the space where quite a few people are being held for crimes, including Davis. After explaining to Toni that he was arrested for an open container violation, which he prefaces as "a violation of my civil rights," Davis says, "You know what it really was, right? You think the National Guard stops if it's two white boys on the street" (*Treme*, "Meet De Boys on the Battlefield"). Toni then points out the error of his assessment, because the friend he was with at the time, a black man, was not arrested, but Davis was, because he also yelled out, "Go back to Fallujah!" at the guardsmen. Davis explains that he is sick of the police state and then says, "I just want my city back" (*ibid*). In this moment, Davis wants to be a crusader for justice, but he is annoyingly unaware of his privilege throughout the scene itself, as well as the incident recalled in the scene. For starters, while we are unaware of how long Davis or any of the other men have been in the holding area, his access to a lawyer of Toni's caliber and prestige, as opposed to a public defender, signals his initial privilege compared to the other men being held. Beyond that, the simple fact that he just wants his city back also shows a space for him that is unlike the space for people of color, particularly when it comes to whether something is a police state or not. Davis has had to deal with a police and military presence for a few months in the aftermath of the storm, whereas people of color were dealing with harassment and prejudice at the hands of police well before Katrina. Even as his behavior presents with shouts of injustice of several varieties during this scene, he fails to see how his own

presence in those spaces is in fact kept safe from those injustices, regardless of how much he desires to be a part of them.

Lynnell Thomas argues that the show fails to fully hold Davis accountable, and that “his unsubstantiated tirades against racial profiling and gentrification reduce these serious, complex issues to comic interludes, side-stepping their racial histories” (Thomas, “People” 217). However, I believe that the show emphasizes his ignorance and idiocy in order to draw critical awareness to his privilege, particularly over the show’s entire four-season run.<sup>22</sup> There are very few scenes with Davis in them, particularly when he is the only main character involved in the scene, that do not show him either railing against injustice, exploiting the cultural labor of people of color, or funneling aspects of New Orleans culture and history through his own narcissistic lens. Just as often, he is seen doing more than one of these behaviors, and the show’s portrayal of him as comedic is not to lessen the impact on, or distract from, how problematic his behaviors are, but instead emphasizes how cluelessly unaware people like Davis McAlary truly are. If, as Hughey describes, white saviors are typically portrayed “as an iron fist in a velvet glove, the knightly savior of the dysfunctional “others” who are redeemable as long as they consent to assimilation and obedience to their white benefactors of class, capital, and compassion,” then, I would argue, Davis is a satirical take on that trope (8). For all of his attempts to play the white savior, his attempts nearly always fail, or he is ignored or laughed at.

When focusing on Davis, critics have paid a lot of attention to his role in the cultural and music communities of New Orleans, not quite as a full-blown interloper

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<sup>22</sup> Many of those who have written about *Treme* either focus entirely on the first season, or wrote their essays after the second season had finished, so they cannot account for the full trajectory of Davis’s character and how infuriating he becomes.



because those communities seem to enjoy his company somewhat, but certainly as a borderline one. There are two particular instances of this behavior that I want to look at in this section beyond how these other critics have examined them, because of how they also allow us to view this problematic aspect of his white savior complex. Both instances present moments in which Davis at the outset seems driven by a desire to better his community through music, yet his actual behaviors when he begins working on the projects say otherwise due to his lack of awareness of his own privilege. The first of these scenes relates to his second season narrative arc and the record he is trying to have produced with his band “DJ Davis and His Bounce Brass Funkateers,” the name of which indicates his desire to blend musical genres that are historically black while his name is on the front. He classifies their sound as “bounce-funk-rap with a brass band twist” (*Treme*, “Feels Like Rain”). With this band, he hopes to spread a simultaneously political and cultural message about post-Katrina New Orleans and the failures of government to take care of the city’s underprivileged communities. His intentions are good, but, again, what *Treme* does so well is how it even allows those intentions to be problematic. In other words, the show wants to portray a white character who many of the show’s viewers might identify with: progressive, compassionate, and political. Cole describes the aftermath of the interaction that lead him to coin the phrase “white savior complex” in a manner not unlike what I write here. Cole explains, “I do not accuse Kristof of racism nor do I believe he is in any way racist. I have no doubt that he has a good heart. Listening to him on the radio, I began to think we could iron the whole thing out over a couple of beers. But that, precisely, is what worries me” (Cole).

The concern comes from those whose privilege is so ingrained that their action of helping others makes them believe that they have no part in the systemic racism that causes these issues in the first place. *Treme* thus undermines that portrayal in which the viewers see themselves and forces those same viewers to question their own problematic behaviors, even as they might see themselves as otherwise progressive, compassionate, and political. From the outset of this Season Two arc, Davis enlists his Aunt Mimi (Elizabeth Ashley) to fund the project, as she has the financial means to do so, and he feels entitled to creative control as a result. Additionally, it also means that he need not worry about money during the writing and production of the record, which allows him to easily survive and not have to worry about food or rent. In a particularly poignant moment from Episode Six of that season, “Feels Like Rain,” Davis is having a meeting with his bandmates. During that scene, he explains the project to them and that, “Our message will be angry and political. We will speak to the injustices and affronts of our time and we shall not be moved.” (*Treme*, “Feels Like Rain”). The first and immediate response Davis’s passion is, “But do we have gigs?” When Davis explains that they will be playing three or four times a week, the next response is, “We don’t even have songs.” In this moment, Davis has the privilege to ignore the immediate concerns facing many of his bandmates. They need this gig to pay for basic living expenses, and so the issues that Davis wants to confront in this project are of lesser concern for them. They are concerns to be sure, and the injustices that Davis wants to address are worth addressing, and we could even commend him for putting his effort and time into doing so. But when people also have to worry about “small” daily issues and concerns like how they can afford basic living expenses, particularly in post-Katrina New Orleans higher cost of living, then those

major concerns have to unfortunately take the back burner for those. Again, Davis's Aunt Mimi is bankrolling this project, and other moments in the show remind us that his parents are also well off and he can find assistance from them. His privilege allows him to remain ignorant of his own role in the systems that keep people and communities underprivileged. By having to consistently worry about daily economic struggles, how are these individuals also expected to find the time and resources to combat larger the issues facing them as well?

Earlier in that same episode, Davis is sitting with Lil Calliope (Ace B), a young rapper who he has recruited to join this band and be the co-front man of the band. The two of them have a conversation back and forth as Davis similarly explains the political focus that he sees the band taking. Their conversation is as follows:

Lil Calliope: What you mean, politics?

Davis: I mean, we write the world we know. We get out there in the middle of the argument.

LC: Which argument now?

D: The one about the city! Where we've been; where we are now; where we're going if we don't stop and think.

LC: Man, Davis, I rhyme what I know.

D: Exactly. That's always the way.

LC: And I know the Calliope [Projects] and coming up in New Orleans, but that's all I got. (*Treme*, "Feels Like Rain")

Davis then gets up and leaves the room and comes back with a handful of CDs. Davis then asks, "You ever listen to Public Enemy?" and then proceeds to give Lil Calliope an

explanation that they are “the great untraveled road of hip-hop: political rage, righteous empowerment, standing tall amid a wasteland of gangsta posing.” Davis then hands him CDs of The Clash and Woody Guthrie. Lil Calliope then gets up to use the bathroom and Annie asks Davis if he is serious. Davis then replies, “New Orleans has enough dance music... Phil Ochs said that what American desperately needed was a pop star with the looks of Elvis Presley and the soul of Che Guevara” (*Treme*, “Feels Like Rain”). Annie asks if Davis thinks Lil Calliope is the one, and Davis answers that he knows it.

This scene sees Davis again asserting that a political message is necessary for this project. Unlike in the later scene with his bandmates, which saw Davis ignorant of his own economic privilege related to the project, here Davis seems to assume that Lil Calliope, because he is black and from the projects, must write about these same political struggles in order to “write what he knows.” It limits Lil Calliope as a human with an individual identity and instead frames him along side a generic stereotype of a black male from the projects. Thomas argues that, “By muting the political rage channeled through post-Katrina bounce music, *Treme* replicates the city’s racialized tourist narrative that proffers a false choice between black culture and black criminality” (“People” 219). Here Davis seems to be verbalizing that trap that Thomas sees the show itself doing. Lil Calliope just wants to make dance music that is not inherently political, a form that Davis might situate in or near that “wasteland gangsta rap.” Davis’s desire to see Lil Calliope become more politically active is a move that, in some ways, “[fails] to relinquish...the myths of racial exoticism and white supremacist desire for a construction of blacks as artistically talented but socially inferior” (Thomas, “Roots” 762-3). Davis sees the talent that Lil Calliope has, but the motivation for mentoring him is driven by Davis’s own

narcissism and desire to be relevant in the New Orleans music community. Davis assumes that Lil Calliope is socially inferior because of the type of music that he wishes to make, and the ways that Davis “teaches” Lil Calliope demonstrate the ways that “this genre of bounce and its expression of black political rage is largely invisible on *Treme*” (Thomas, “People” 218-9). Even though Davis wants to raise hell politically with this musical project, he does so through exploitation and “whitesplaining” rather than through listening and allowing other voices to engage in the conversation, an idea I will return to later when discussing *Treme*’s own issues and limitations in how it utilizes testimonial narrative.

Additionally, when Lil Calliope asks Davis which argument he is referring to it again asks us to consider aspects of the white savior complex. Lil Calliope, even though he has only known Davis a short while, can still pinpoint and call out his behavior as a progressive white activist railing about the latest en vogue cause. This commentary is particularly relevant for much of my work on Post-Katrina literature, and my desire to have those texts read as a way to keep the dialogue and conversations started in the aftermath of the storm alive. In other words, at one point, Hurricane Katrina was that *en vogue* cause in which everyone around the country rallied to help out, whether through donating or volunteering. And that was wonderful to see so many people participate in that moment. But then the next issue arose and took the attention of those activists, even though the work in New Orleans was not, and in many ways still is not, finished. Cole argues, “The White Savior Industrial Complex is a valve for releasing the unbearable pressures that build in a system built on pillage. We can participate in the economic destruction of Haiti over long years, but when the earthquake strikes it feels good to send

\$10 each to the rescue fund” (Cole). It takes attention and focus to actually address the real structural and institutional issues that create disaster events such as these. And while financial donations do help, they only work short term, but the way they make a person feel like they did something good makes it so they no longer have to focus on those long term, structural fixes.

This seems like a good moment to pause in my analysis to offer my own moment of self-reflection. One of the reasons I am drawn to analyze Davis and his behaviors is that I wonder how much of myself is in him, how much of my own privilege I am unaware of, particularly in writing this dissertation on these particular thematic elements. I am an outsider to New Orleans, never having lived there and only having visited twice, both times coming after I had started work on this dissertation project. I am a Pennsylvanian, by way of Ohio, writing about and analyzing texts dealing with this space in which I have no real investment, other than my own progressive politics and a belief that Post-Katrina literature, like other literatures of the oppressed, has the ability to humanize and transform those oppressed communities. Additionally, I am a white male tackling texts that are largely by or about individuals and communities of color. Because of my cultural and spatial identifiers, I worry that I either (1) have no business engaging with these issues or (2) am missing key moments of analysis or experience that I cannot ever understand, regardless of how much theoretical or experiential textual reading and analysis I do. In many ways, I am Davis McAlary.

My intentions with this dissertation are politically and culturally progressive, and the thematic elements I am engaging with are what I hope will give readers of Post-Katrina texts a better way of understanding the experiences of Katrina survivors, to build

empathy and to construct more positive futures. Even as my intentions are good, though, I have that constant fear in the back of my head that I still have no right to engage with these things. Am I, like Davis, also not realizing how I am using others' experiences I could never understand in order to support my arguments? Davis falls in line with Richard Dyer's argument that, "the position of speaking as a white person is one that white people now almost never acknowledge" (xiv). Yet, unlike Davis who never seems to show any concern for his behaviors, I hope that my awareness of this fear, and acknowledgement of my privilege and these shortcomings, allows me to continually shift and grow in my own experiences, as well as to leave room for others to interpret my work here in ways that could be improved beyond what I could ever imagine. In other words, again following from Dyer, "It seems only proper then that I start by talking about *this* white person's position" (xiv).

Returning to *Treme*, the next moment in which Davis portrays this problematic behavior comes in Season Three, and again sees him working with a group of diverse musicians on a single, long-term project in which he views himself as the leader. This time, rather than driven by the production of an album, Davis wants to write an opera, which will be "Verdi meets rhythm and blues. The story of Katrina and its aftermath told in musical verse" (*Treme*, "Knock With Me-Rock With Me"). He again spends a significant amount of time during this season recruiting and exploiting New Orleans musicians of color, but this time he attempts to get some really big name people. In the previous season's arc, the show used real musicians as well, guest starring as themselves, but they were famous on a more local level. In this season, Davis attempts to recruit Fats Domino and John Boute, whose song provides the opening credits its soundtrack, among

others, all of whom are significant figures in the musical history of not only New Orleans but to jazz and R & B as a whole. While one reviewer of the show wrote, “This season we’ve seen him truly care about his project, and about those he roped in to participating in it,” I would argue there are still some glaring issues with this third season arc, again related to his own narcissism and privilege (Phipps). These issues begin with Davis’s behavior throughout the season, which mirror similar problematic behaviors from the previous one, in that he seems singularly focused on his own vision for the opera that he fails to allow for other voices in the process. Whether it is the studio technicians, his Aunt Mimi, or any number of the major names he enlists to help, it is apparent throughout that he is more concerned with how they can be used for what he wants than for what he can provide to them. Even more telling for this season’s narrative arc, though, is the way that it also then culminates with Davis abandoning the project when it seems destined to no longer be an opera, but a compilation album, and he writes a song titled “I Quit” signaling that abandonment.

In this moment, it becomes depressingly clear just how little Davis cared for the political aspects of his project. Even if it became obvious that the project was destined to fail as an opera, the compilation CD that emerged from the process could have still become a political driver with which to engage with those issues and Davis could have been at least a partial architect in its construction as such. Instead, he writes a song in which he whines and quits, and that song, ironically, becomes a huge hit. Davis becomes torn: on the one hand, he just wrote a song saying he quit; on the other hand, the song is so popular he feels as if he must continue making music. Regardless, both instances signal his true intentions to be taken serious in the music scene and not as an activist.



Earlier in the show, this was also hinted at during Davis's joke run for a city council seat that he had no real intention or desire to hold. For him activism is performative, bolstered by his own privilege and ability to bounce from one cause to the next and insert him into a space in which he has no real cultural capital—that of black musicians in New Orleans. This failure of Davis to recognize his own privilege within the spaces that he inserts himself is a thread that he has had since early in the show. As Thomas points out,

While the sanctimonious McAlary castigates his gay white neighbors for being elitist and possibly racist for moving into the historically black Tremé neighborhood without respecting its history or its contemporary culture, he fails to acknowledge how his own access to black spaces, appropriation of black cultural traditions, and ability to return to the security of a gentrified section of Tremé or his family's uptown estate conjure up a history of slumming in black neighborhoods. ("People" 217)

He is constantly pointing out and calling out others for behaviors that he himself does. He uses his WWOZ radio show to rail against the underrepresented genres and artists, and he is always at odds with his show's producer as a result, but when it comes to his own behaviors as a producer of music, he silences those same artists he wishes to raise up. Throughout *Treme* Davis is always that warning of the problematics of the white savior complex and the dangers of failing to recognize privilege even as those same people rail against other aspects of privilege. *Treme* makes visible those viewers who are in many visual representations of these issues, according to Dyer, typically able to remain a "privileged observer who is none the less not 'in' the picture" (45). He is a character

whose behaviors and characteristics force viewers who align with him to confront their own problematic position within systemic and institutionalized issues.

I now want to shift my focus away from a purely racial identity privilege into how *Treme* also incorporates space into that discussion. As a show that is concerned with the long, slow physical and emotional recovery of New Orleans post-Katrina, it is no surprise that *Treme* incorporates space into its narrative. It should be noted that as a show, *Treme* does not focus much on natural environmental concerns but instead keeps its ecocritical lens trained on the urban spaces of New Orleans. The environmental disaster of Katrina, while never really shown in the show, is still ever present, however, maintaining that ghost-like presence I mentioned earlier. As Kornelia Freitag notes, *Treme*'s "stark narrative and visual interruptions in the flow of the human (interest) stories *do* nonetheless reference the material impact of the storm on the community of New Orleans" (62). In analyzing how the show engages with spatial privilege, I will be looking primarily at the character of Albert "Big Chief" Lambrieux, and how his personal attempts at reconstruction as a black man in post-Katrina is often framed in direct opposition to the reconstructions of white characters. *Treme* links these oppositions through editing several times throughout the show, but it also marks the physical reconstruction of Albert's space on its own in unique ways, which I will touch on here and then return to in the next section related to *Treme*'s representation of the pantemporal event-space.

I want to look at two specific moments that Albert's experience, related to space, is set up against a similar experience to those of white characters. In doing so, I hope to show how *Treme* engages with the housing crisis in New Orleans after Katrina and how

that housing crisis caused what Shiela Crowley describes as, “The people with the fewest resources...experiencing the greatest level of uncertainty” (121). The way that these moments are framed not only relates that uncertainty felt by these people to the show’s viewers, but it also highlights how economic privilege experienced by the white characters in a tangentially-located space allowed for them to overcome a housing crisis sooner and with higher degree. Part of this is due to the fact that pre-storm housing was also privileged spatially, with poor people of color more likely to reside in areas that would cause more damage to their homes. Which is of course what happened, as “housing that was affordable to low-income people comprised the majority of what was lost” (Crowley 125). *Treme* handles this housing crisis in various ways over its run, from specific ways that government and government-associated organizations mishandled it to several characters dealing with the infamous FEMA trailers. In doing so, *Treme* does something that I take from Michael Samuel, who argues, “From this, we might draw the conclusion that the compositional use of spaces in Simon’s shows is perhaps the solution. In working spaces off one another, Simon illustrates the wider problem, or at least instigates a dialogue with intent of providing the solution” (39).

The first of these moments comes in Season Two, Episode Three, titled “On Your Way Down.” Towards the end of this episode, both Albert and Janette are seen in an extremely crowded waiting room, where they are hoping to meet with representatives from the Road Home organization related to damages to their homes from Hurricane Katrina. At this point in the series, Janette has relocated full time to New York City and has just returned for a quick turn around trip specifically for this, because her home in New Orleans was broken into. The first part of this scene has Janette arriving, taking a

number and working her way through the crowd, until she ends up finding a seat right next to Albert. Each of them holds a collection of documents, though Janette's is in a nice file portfolio, whereas Albert's looks to be a single manila envelope. The *mise-en-scene* established with this paperwork comparison immediately sets up how the remainder of this scene will highlight Janette's privilege, which is also reinforced by Janette's comment when she sits down: "I'm not gonna make my flight" (*Treme*, "On Your Way Down"). Janette's privilege has already allowed her to escape post-Katrina New Orleans for New York City, so rather than being primarily concerned about insurance and rebuilding, she is more annoyed that it will cause her to miss her flight. Albert, on the other hand, needs this insurance money in order to start rebuilding his home so that it is livable again.

After cutting away to a few scenes dealing with other characters, *Treme* returns to Janette and Albert at the insurance office. It begins with Janette telling Albert, "The first floor of my house went under. You—much damage?" (*Treme*, "On Your Way Down"). Albert just nods in response, and Janette continues, saying, "I moved to New York—the city, not the state. But I got a call telling me my house got robbed" (*ibid*). As the audience knows from other scenes involving Albert's space, his home lost significantly more than just the first floor; it was nearly fully destroyed, becoming a skeleton of a home. Janette continues to talk about her issues, while Albert sits quietly listening and nodding. He turns and looks concerned when she mentions being robbed, but otherwise he seems largely uninterested in her issues. He finally speaks after she explains that she had to convince her boss to give her a day off just to come down, to which Albert asks, "So you're here today without a scheduled appointment?" (*ibid*). He looks genuinely

blown away by this, and he follows up his question with a sigh, and then shakes his head as the show again cuts away to another character's narrative. When it finally cuts back, we first see Janette, not Albert, in the insurance office, as the agent explains to her that, unfortunately, they cannot handle her case today because it is not the date she had originally scheduled it for. The show then cuts to Albert, whose Road Home worker tells him that she was also screwed by State Farm before cutting back to Janette trying to convince her case worker to cut her some slack. We then get one last look at Albert and his caseworker, who tells him that everything looks in order and he should be good to go for receiving his assistance.

There are a couple of interesting things about this scene as it relates to both characters' ability to rebuild after the storm, and both are signaled by how the show privileges Janette's narrative in these scenes. I mean this in two senses: one, that her character, much like Davis, is unaware of how she is flaunting her privilege, even as she tries to be aware of the larger issues facing Katrina survivors; two, that the show actually privileges the amount of time spent on her narrative during these moments. To clarify the first type of privilege, I point to the fact that she had the means with which to leave New Orleans and that her home was only partially damaged. Not only was she financially stable enough to do, she was (1) able to do so of her own free will, unlike many New Orleanians during Katrina, and (2) she is able to pay rent in New York City *and* afford to keep her home in New Orleans. Additionally, her asking Albert about how much damage his house sustained seems mildly confrontational. What I mean is that she brings it up almost as if to justify her own tragedy against the tragedy of Albert. This is later reinforced by what she says to the caseworker near the end of the scene when he explains

that if he cuts her a break, then he would have to cut everyone a break, and then where would they be? Janette says, “I don’t know. We’d all get a break then” (*Treme*, “On Your Way Down”). These moments seem to indicate that Janette feels as if all who survived Katrina were affected in the same way, and while that might be *physically* true in that the storm destroyed spaces in a similar manner, the truth is that poor communities of color felt those effects in much more drastic and long-lasting ways. She seems to embody some characteristics of Davis here: righteous indignation masking her desire to fix her own issue. By directly linking her experience in the storm to those who have had it significantly worse, she attempts to elicit sympathy with the caseworker.

The second way that this scene privileges Janette is related to the editing of the show, and I would argue it reinforces its portrayal of her privilege in this way. Because of Janette’s protestations and challenges to the caseworkers for her own case, her narrative overpowers Albert’s narrative in that scene. In some ways, this refers to my work with the concept of entrainment in the previous chapter, and how one temporal experience can overpower others and become the perceived temporality. Here, and as I will discuss in more detail in the next section, each characters’ narrative arc becomes an individual temporality that is part of the show’s overall narrative temporality. In these moments, a more powerful narrative can entrain a less powerful one, or, as in this case, a narrative belonging to the character with more privilege will be entrain the other. Therefore, the show represents this overvaluing of a particular story for no reason other than that person has more privilege. This is reinforced by the ways that Janette continually behaves unaware of her privilege described above. In other words, *Treme* represents her privilege through both her actions and through the time allotted for her story, but the irony

becomes her downfall. What I mean is that, she comes into the scene utilizing her privilege, but that her privilege does not allow her to actually be successful. The show simultaneously sets up her privilege both narratively and structurally, but it does not allow her to succeed thereby highlighting her negative behavior related to privilege. She comes without an appointment for that day and assumes she will be seen. She continually situates her own, more privileged experience during Katrina within the experiences of others who had it worse. She attempts to utilize a performance of activism as a last resort.

The next element of Albert's narrative that I want to discuss relates to how *Treme* privileges space has to do with how the show makes the reconstruction of his space a metaphor for the long and slow recovery of many Katrina survivors. As stated above, I will explore this idea in a different way in the next section, but for now I want to look at both how the show visually represents the slowness of this change and, more importantly, how it frames shots of Albert's home in opposition to homes of white characters or their families. These comparative scenes almost become a shot/reverse shot in the ways that they seem to be in conversation with each other, and that conversation is what reveals the aspects of spatial privilege that *Treme* represents, similar to how Samuel argues this is how the show presents solutions to this issue.

I want to quickly run through how Albert's spaces are visually constructed as a work-in-progress throughout the show. Even in its completely reconstructed state towards the end of the show's run, his space is still visually unfinished and empty. In the first season, Albert is a squatter in the abandoned and destroyed bar where his Mardi Gras tribe held practice for their parades. This space is always seen as dark and dirty, with floodlights or daylight being the only sources of light for the space. Shelves and walls are

bare, save for where signs of black mold and other water damage are indicated. He is later forced out when the owner returns, though he does tell him that they can still have practice there. By the second season, he has finally returned to his home and here is where *Treme* truly visually represents this long process of recovery that Albert represents. Throughout the second season, his space is nothing but a skeleton: concrete floors and walls that are just studs and frame. In a few scenes, one wall can be seen with drywall and plaster, but the space is largely unfinished and bare. It is also darkly lit. Over the course of the second season, and into and through the third, the house is seen as progressively more and more complete, but still never finished. More walls get drywall and plaster; the rooms grow brighter as the floors and walls are cleaned and painted. But still, by the end of the third season, there are still walls that only exist as studs and frames. It is only in the third season that Albert's house is finally seen as "complete," though it still is a bare minimum definition of that. While all of the walls are now full and painted, and he has furniture throughout, missing are the small touches that make a house feel truly like a home: photographs, art, flowers, etc. Even after all of that time, Albert's space is still significantly unfinished, particularly once we see it framed in conversation with those spaces of the white characters. I will return to this idea, and the role it plays in the show's representation of the pantemporal event-space, in the next section.

For now, I want to specifically look at one of these conversations that Albert's space has through these pairings. Perhaps it is also worth mentioning that these pairings occur on Christmas day, for the ways in which spaces hold extra importance as a communal gathering location on holidays. The episode, "I Thought I Heard Buddy Bolden Say," is the fifth episode of Season Three. In this scene, *Treme* establishes a



conversation between Albert's in-progress home with the home of Davis's well-to-do family, which shows no visual signs of damage at all, let alone any state of disarray. Earlier in the episode, before the pairing occurs, a scene in which Albert is working on his Indian costume while having a conversation with Delmond before he leaves for a gig has a shot that emphasizes the current state of Albert's home. As this scene begins, the camera starts on a table holding a variety of beads and begins to pan up. As the camera pans, two vertical wood studs, with a single wire running up the stud on the left of the frame, divide the frame in thirds, with Albert between them, shown working on sewing his costume. The scene then moves to a shot/reverse-shot as the two of them converse, and then it cuts again to a similarly framed shot of the two studs and Albert in the middle, before cutting to a shot from the side of Albert in which we can see a wall with unfinished paint and two different folding lawn chairs, one of which Delmond was sitting in. As the camera holds on this shot, Albert asks Delmond if he is still able to give him a ride the next day to a protest related to the housing crisis that he wants to attend, which again reinforces this role that Albert plays in relating the spatial issues of the storm to the viewers through the show.

Later in the episode, Christmas Day begins and the show focuses on various family dinners. One of these dinners is happening at Davis's parents house and includes his family members, as well as Annie and her parents, who have just come in for the holiday to see her. The set design for his parents house shows a space with fine art on the walls, vases on shelves, and exquisite looking centerpieces on the table. Everyone is dressed elegantly, and they drink wine. In one shot, behind Annie's parents, we can see a bookshelf still packed with books, an indication that the house did not receive much, if

any, water damage during the storm. The conversation here deals with Annie's recent record deal, how lovely the weather is, and riding the streetcar. The last topic of which Davis's mother comments, "We haven't done that for years. When you live here, you take certain things for granted" (*Treme*, "I Thought I Heard Buddy Bolden Say"). Here, their privilege in avoiding public transportation—or to use it as a leisurely mode as her comment indicates—signals the privilege that this family has continued to experience post-Katrina. The conversation then turns to crime, with Annie's parents voicing their concerns. Davis's mother says there are reasons to be optimistic, though, because "city council just voted to tear down the public housing projects," which is the event that Albert was protesting earlier in the episode (*ibid*). The remainder of this section of the scene sees Davis arguing with his mother about this, where he again becomes the problematic white voice of those who have been most adversely affected by the storm, commenting at one point, "I love it. The Uptown matron telling the folks in the 'hood how to pronounce where they live" (*ibid*). While Davis is still becoming the problematic white savior voice here, his comments also help connect the scene to the earlier moments of Albert at the protest and to how this scene will have a conversation with the one it is about to transition to, with Albert and his family at their dinner.

When the scene finally shifts to their narrative, the camera again establishes the comparison between the spaces by also reflecting back to an earlier scene, the one with Albert and Delmond. Here the camera again pans to establish the scene, this time left to right, as it moves past wall studs in the foreground with the family sitting around a table preparing to eat in a room that is all white, with not much more than the table they are eating on and the white artificial Christmas tree in it. The comparisons continue, as we

get a closer look at the dinner table. The family is using paper napkins, compared with the fine cloth at Davis's Christmas. They are sitting in different chairs. In one angle, we still see another empty wall behind one of the supporting characters, mirroring in contrast the bookshelf full of books behind Annie's parents. In Albert's home, the absence is also a reminder. What is not seen is what also allows viewers to see and engage with these issues, as it frames this conversation between the two drastically different experiences of post-Katrina recovery. This episode takes place a full two years after the storm, and the ways that these two groups of people have been able to move on is staggering. The show demonstrates the privilege of space in the aftermath of Katrina, particularly for white middle and upper class New Orleanians. More importantly, however, is the ways that *Treme* moves those representations beyond the immediate time frame of the storm and lets us see how those issues continued for many poor people of color in the years after Katrina.

*Treme*, like any other Post-Katrina text, deals with specific issues of race and space/environment. However, compared with other texts, it brings notions of privilege related to those issues to the forefront. While discussions of privilege have occurred throughout the dialogues surrounding Katrina, particularly in how privilege allowed for particular groups and spaces to be less adversely affected or to recover more quickly, the ways that *Treme* engages with it takes those dialogues a step further, in some ways. Through white characters who are portrayed as largely progressive, yet still problematically unaware of certain aspects of their own privilege, the show calls attention to how those of us who consider ourselves allies must still continually recognize, address,

and call attention to our own privilege as we do so. As Cole reminds us, “If we are going to interfere in the lives of others, a little due diligence is a minimum requirement” (Cole).

### **The Long-Event of Katrina in *Treme***

I would now like to move into a more detailed examination of how *Treme* represents and reproduces the concept of the pantemporal event-space, and that concept’s distortions of temporal experience for people during Katrina. While my earlier arguments concerning that concept establish the short-term hurricane itself as the event, the long event of Katrina still falls under its umbrella. The pantemporal event-space is that moment in which multiple temporalities, both short and long term, converge and are experienced, and so far I have only looked at how long term changes, such as climate change or civil rights, are experienced in the short term moment of the storm, and with how texts have reproduced that experience for the reader or viewer. Since *Treme* sets itself entirely after that short-term moment, we will have to think about the pantemporal event-space slightly differently. In this section, I will explore how *Treme* functions in representing a long-term event through short-term events and portrayals. Here the convergence arises for the viewer *in the act of viewing* itself. To clarify, *Treme* as a television show allows the viewer to experience the long-term struggles of Katrina survivors, by simultaneously condensing the temporality of those long-term events into season- and episode-long chunks, while also matching the long-term experience of digesting those chunks. What I mean by this is that the show’s weekly schedule closely matches the temporality of the events that it portrays. The pilot episode originally aired in April 2010, and the final episode aired December 2013. The show “ran” for three years and eight months. The pilot episode begins in December of 2005, and the events of the

final episode take place around Mardi Gras 2009 in February of that year. This is a span of around three years and two months, a nearly one-to-one ratio of temporal experience between how the show aired and the events that it portrayed. Interestingly, the airing of the show took slightly longer, and I would read this as further evidence of the show attempting to replicate a distorted temporal experience for viewers by expanding that temporality out even further. This section will look at how the show complicates these temporal experiences by examining how the narrative temporalities of the show parallel with the narrative temporalities of Katrina survivors, its simultaneous cloudy but established diegetic temporality, and finally how the multi-character narrative structure, combined with particular pairing and editing techniques, provides an interesting representation of the pantemporal event-space.

*Treme* generally follows a fairly straightforward narrative temporality, even as it jumps from character to character. The show starts just after the storm and continually moves forward in time, and finally finishes just under three years after Hurricane Katrina. Save for the aforementioned Season One finale, where the viewers are shown through flashback what the various characters went through during the storm itself, the show is traditional in its temporal narration. There are moments where this traditional temporality is complicated, including the Season One finale, and I will discuss those further shortly. For now, I want to look at how the show's diegetic temporality parallels the temporality of survivors in New Orleans, by subtly linking the recovery process of rebuilding physical spaces inhabited by characters with the opening credits, which establish a way for viewers to experience this long-term temporality over the four season run of the show.

I take as my inspiration for this analysis the work done by Roland Barthes related to temporality and narration. In his essay “Story-time and Fact-sequence-time,” he explains two types of narrative temporality: discourse-time and story-time. Discourse-time is what he refers to as “the time covering the action of narration,” whereas story-time is “the time of what is being narrated within the framework of this action” (Barthes 144). For *Treme*, I am reading the discourse-time as the thirty-six, hour-long episodes. The story-time is the three years and two months that the show covers in its narrative. Barthes admits that these two ideas are common concepts within his field—the distinction between discourse and story is a long-accepted convention in literary studies—but he discusses two more types of narrative temporality: observation-time, or “the time of the act of viewing,” and fact-sequence-time, which Barthes explains as a variation of story-time that can be divided into material and formal time facts (144-5, 148). This observation-time is what I read as the long-experience time of the three years and eight months that the show aired for. If looking at the show from a binge-watching perspective—in other words, being able to watch an entire series at one go—this would also be the thirty-six-or-so hours watching the four seasons, a span of time that is still significantly longer than it takes to watch a film, though it’s closer to the length of time it would take to read a novel of conventional length. What *Treme* does so interestingly, and what allows it to so effectively parallel the temporality of survivors with the temporality of viewers, is that nearly one-to-one ratio of story-time and observation-time. Or to a closer merging of two concepts Alfonso De Toro refers to as “real act time” and “fictional act time.” Real act time is “a time that is pragmatically linked to empirical historical time,” and fictional act time is “the time of poetic texts” (114). At least during

its original airings, watching *Treme* took almost exactly the same amount of time to view as it did for the characters to live out the actions portrayed on the show. And because *Treme* is set entirely after the storm, and is thematically focused on various aspects of physical and cultural recovery post-Katrina, I am arguing that the show is intentional in this relationship between viewers and characters, and as I will show near the end of the section, between viewers and survivors as a result.

As discussed in the previous section, one way that *Treme* represents this slow recovery comes in how it compares the rebuilding of Albert Lambreaux's home to those spaces of white characters. While I discussed this comparison above as one of the elements that the show used to demonstrate spatialized white privilege related to Katrina, here I want to look at how the show carefully sets up the length of this process, even linking it directly to the changes in the opening credits. This connection between Albert's home and the way the viewer is presented the title during the opening credits parallels not only the slow recovery experienced by actual Katrina survivors, but it does so by showing how things often get worse before they get better during that recovery.

Each season sees small changes to the opening credits, though some things remain the same. One element that changes with each season is the way the title of the show is presented. In the first season, "Treme" appears on a water-damaged and mildewed wall, with most of the letters having pieces missing or scraped away. Interesting in this title card is the way that these damaged letters seem to have been already damaged, and not chipped away as a result of the storm. This indicates a connection between the conditions of space, pre- and post-Katrina, as not entirely different. Communities in New Orleans were already struggling and damaged before the storm, and Katrina merely exacerbated

those issues. In the second season, the wall in which the title appears has somehow gotten worse. The same brown spot behind the “m” and “e” in Treme is still there, along with all of the black and red marks running along the left, right, and bottom borders. Additionally, though, more mildew and black mold is creeping in to the area around the title, leaving very little white space left. The space in which this title appears has clearly been neglected entirely up to this point, but how or why it has been neglected is unknown. By the third season, the title card offers a more optimistic view of the space. While it initially appears entirely covered by the mildew and grime, paint and plaster is quickly applied, and the title is shown as an indent on a white wall, still showing cracks and bumps over it. While it is an improvement, the space is still in reconstruction, even though this season is taking place approximately two years after the storm. Two years to even apply paint and plaster to the space. Finally, in Season Four, the wall is completely clean and white, and a single hand is shown applying the finishing brushes to the letter “m” and the space is finally, three years later, appearing to be fully reconstructed to a state even cleaner than it was prior to the storm.

Albert’s house follows the same trajectory of slow recovery over the course of the show. Even more telling in how these two representations of the title card and his house are linked is the fact that it is Albert’s hand painting those final brushstrokes to the “m” in the title card. As I talked about earlier, during the first season Albert is barely able to work at all on his house. His walls bear a striking resemblance to the title card walls, with water damage and mildew easily seen even as they are in the background of the shots. The walls themselves are still there, and it is only during the second season that they are shown removed with just the skeletal studs in view. His skeleton home remains that way



all through the second season until the third season where some, but not all, have seen their plaster replaced. Again, that connection to the title card is clear: plaster appears in both, but it is unfinished plaster, either bumpy and cracked as the title card, or still missing as many of the walls in his home. Finally, in the fourth season Albert's home is "finished," though many might have a hard time calling it a home. While all of the walls are clean and white, they are bare and the house itself is missing any of the touches that most of us add to make a space feel like it is ours, like photos, art, or other decorations.

Albert's experience, which the show connects to the audience's experience of watching through the title cards, becomes a visual representation of the long, slow, often tedious and imbalanced recovery experienced by Katrina survivors. In some instances, individuals and communities are still, nearly thirteen years later, dealing with recovery, whether physical or emotional. As I explained in the previous section, though, this imbalance is primarily linked to economic and racial factors, with people of color, of which Albert becomes a stand-in, having to deal with additional issues related to physical reconstruction compared to white individuals, who are able to reconstruct their spaces far more quickly, or in some instances had their spaces barely destroyed. This long-term temporality of reconstruction pairs with the long-term temporality of *Treme* itself as a multi-season TV show. The show's trajectory of covering this longer time span gives it a sense of clear temporal scale, which the audience can understand and experience as they watch. Much like *Beasts of the Southern Wild* using the aurochs to visually represent a long-term temporality such as climate change, *Treme* uses its title cards and the recovery of Albert's home to similarly represent a long-term temporal experience for viewers. The key difference is that *Treme* is more concerned with replicating a long temporality with a

long temporal representation, rather than embodying that long temporality with a short temporal metaphor like the beasts.

Even though *Treme* has a clear, established diegetic temporality that is understood by viewers to be moving forward in time, it still clouds that temporality throughout the show's run. What I mean by this is that, while as viewers we know and can track roughly when the show takes place, the details of how much time passes between scenes and episodes is often hard to discern while watching. Harweg describes these differences between what is happening and the actual time that things happen as material facts and formal facts. He writes, "[M]aterial facts are facts in the proper sense, actions, incidents or situations. On the other hand, formal facts are clock and calendar time" (148). The material facts that *Treme* portrays are often ungrounded in specific formal facts, but the show does provide markers to help keep the show framed, and those markers allow the viewer to maintain the overall story-time temporality of the show and of the survivors that I discussed above. Sometimes these markers are specific title cards, such as the ones that open each season. Season One begins "Three Months After," Season Two is "Fourteen Months After," Season Three kicks off "Twenty-Five Months After," and the fourth season is "Thirty-Eight Months After" (*Treme*). These reorient the viewer between the gaps in each season, serving as a reminder for not only where things left off, but also for structuring a more precise timeframe for each particular season. These types of signifiers also, as Harweg explains, signal both an erasure of those events as well as an acknowledgement that the original temporality is still continuing. He writes,

When, for example, a new chapter in a narration starts with the expression 'two years later', then this expression is an indicator that two years of this strand of

fact-sequence-time, at least the material variety of it, are jumped and omitted, under the condition that the same strand of fact-sequence-time is being continued.

(155)

During the seasons, these markers might also come through as specific events like Mardi Gras or the Jazz Fest, but they also can appear in news reports or other visual cues. One example of this is the end of Season Three, in which a news report is seen showing coverage of the Democratic National Convention, specifically Day Four of the event. As viewers, we can easily ascertain what specific date that took place on,<sup>23</sup> which can orient that episode into a clearer temporality. However, in between those markers the show does not give us a clear sense for the passage of time, mimicking the ways that temporality was often clouded for Katrina survivors which I discussed in detail in the previous chapter. Using Harweg to describe what is occurring here, I would argue that “such localisation of locally different material strands of fact-sequence time that do not appear in the same area of perception is generally only possible by a recourse to units of formal fact-sequence-time” (149). In other words, the material strands of the narrative—what is occurring on the screen as we watch—happen over uncertain periods of time, but we can rely on formal strands to re-center our understanding of that narrative temporality.

One way that *Treme* clouds its diegetic temporality occurs through editing, specifically how they often cut the multiple character narratives together. Typically in an ensemble parallel narrative such as this, the viewer can understand that when it cuts between two or three character arcs and then back again within a set of scenes, those scenes are happening concurrently in the temporality of the show. For example, we might

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<sup>23</sup> 28 August 2008, almost three years to the day of Hurricane Katrina’s Louisiana landfall.

see Character A shopping at a grocery store, and then we see a cut to Character B and Character C walking through a park together having a conversation. The film or show would then cut back to Character A, still at the grocery store, and back again to Characters B and C at the park, and so on. Because the cuts back and forth between the different characters in their different settings happen over each other and return to each other, the narrative of the show establishes those as occurring simultaneously. In *Treme*, because of the sheer number of character arcs to focus on, this type of editing occurs quite often. However, something interesting happens every once in a while. It does not happen every time, but it happens on occasion and it causes the viewer to, perhaps just briefly, become disoriented in the temporality of the multiple narratives as they play out. *Treme* overlaps these narratives, but every so often it does so with events that are quite clearly happening at different times of the day. As I discussed in the previous chapter, many Katrina survivors had their temporalities warped and distorted, with short-term time spans seemingly lasting longer. Days felt like weeks or months. For *Treme*, and its focus on the long, slow recovery of post-Katrina lives, these distortions occur to remind us of these experiences in its own way. Harweg might argue that this temporal distortion is, perhaps, a result of the show's multiple character narratives, whereas a single character narrative is easier to maintain. He explains,

But material strands of fact-sequence-time can often, even in most cases, not be correlated to each other. Moreover, in most cases, a material strand of fact-sequence-time cannot be clearly identified at all, or, more precisely, it is not easy to say how to define or segregate it. This difficulty refers to the dimension of consecutiveness as well as to the dimension of simultaneity. Nevertheless, certain

material strands of fact-sequence-time seem to exist which are able to eliminate this difficulty or at least keep it within limits. *These are those strands of fact-sequence-time that are connected to a certain individual—to an individual and not to a certain temporal allo-individual or a group of individuals...* If we connect...strands of fact-sequence-time to an individual...we avoid the difficulty of having to identify additional criteria in the dimension of consecutiveness for a beginning and an end of the strands. (149-50, emphasis mine)

The addition of extra characters and their own narrative temporalities can make it harder to maintain an overall temporality of the narrative, because additional criteria are then required to do so. This difficulty for the viewer to maintain that overall temporality comes simply from the fact that there are so many narratives to track. On top of that, I would add that the show also incorporates these moments of asynchronous editing techniques, which only disorient viewers even further.

A great example of this asynchronous temporality occurs in the Season Three finale episode titled, "Tipitina." In this episode, there is a montage of a number of character narratives that establish them as occurring during the day: LaDonna is in court testifying about her rape case; Davis goes to a record store to drop off copies of his CD; Nelson arrives at an awards ceremony honoring Mayor Nagin, while Desiree is also there to protest the city's involvement in the NOAH project issues. Immediately after the shots of Nelson and Desiree at the awards meeting, the show cuts to Toni and Terry sitting outside of Terry's trailer at nighttime, moving time forward for the show and the viewer. The scene following this, finds Delmond having a conversation at a bar when a news report comes on the TV showing the events of the awards ceremony. Then the show

moves to the next day, as Sofia arrives back home and catches Terry in his underwear at her house. So far, the temporality is straightforward: the first few events took place during the day, and then we understand that Toni and Terry are sitting outside that night and Delmond is watching the reports of the council meeting which occurred earlier in the day, and the temporality moves forward again into the next day. However, the very next scene completely distorts this temporality, as the show immediately moves back to Desiree at the awards ceremony, where she is asking a few reporters if they think Mayor Nagin will bring up NOAH on his own.

Another distortion of temporality also occurs in the Season One finale, "I'll Fly Away." As mentioned earlier, this is the only episode that gives the viewer any visual representation of what the characters were doing immediately before Hurricane Katrina. While their actions, thoughts, and feelings about pre-storm life are often referenced through dialogue, this is the only time that the show lets the viewers actually see what has happened, but does so by moving back in time. As this episode closes out, LaDonna is seen at her brother's graveside funeral service. As she stands there, an unseen woman sings, "Just a Closer Walk With Thee," and the camera slowly zooms in on LaDonna, ending in an extreme close-up and becoming blurry. The screen image continues to blur, and a cell phone is heard ringing, but it is unclear whether this phone is someone's at the funeral or whether it is the phone from the scene that this blends into. I would argue that the ringing phone is both, and becomes a bridge between these past and present temporalities that are about to unfold, and which are framed on either end by the funeral scene, the woman singing, and the sound of the phone ringing. As the scene cuts away to the past, and because the viewer has to this point only seen the lives of the characters in a

post-Katrina temporal space, it takes a few moments to recognize that the show is, in fact, jumping backward in time to show their lives just before the storm. The show cuts to a scene with LaDonna's brother answering the ringing phone, but it is only after we start to hear snippets of his conversation that we understand who this is and when it is taking place. Kornelia Freitag describes this moment where LaDonna's brother Daymo reappears as a disruption of the realism the show typically presents. She writes, "The movement from body that is...missing to found but dead body, on to active living and victimized body, to a body that is securely entombed...is a disconcerting reversed order of things" (73). This brief disorientation of the show's temporality also disorients the viewer and their experience while watching the show, again mirroring the temporal chaos of Katrina survivors and allowing it to, in some ways, be felt by the viewer while they watch.

Also interesting is what this montage does in establishing another element of pantemporal convergence that it uses at the end of each season. I will discuss this in more detail in a few paragraphs from now, but for now it is worth noting how *Treme* does a version of this at the end of each season, by converging multiple, independent experiences of a single event under the umbrella of a short song. These songs become a collection of temporal narrative experiences housed within a single viewing temporality that is the length of the song. While the Season One montage is not quite a musical montage in the same sense as the other seasons do, the way that it bookends the flashback montage with the woman singing at the funeral hints at a similar approach to those later ones.

I mentioned above that another way that *Treme* clouds its narrative is by making it unclear just how much time is passing in between scenes or episodes, at least with any sort of precision. Often the temporal markers that the show uses come from major events that are important to New Orleans: Carnival, Mardi Gras, the Jazz Festival. These events occur at roughly the same time each year, and because of the temporal distance of the show with the real world events, we can easily figure out when, exactly, these moments did occur. In Season One, Episode Eight, “All On a Mardi Gras Day,” the show portrays the first Mardi Gras since Katrina. We know the narratives of this episode took place, then, on 26 February 2006. Interesting too is this episode’s choice of title. *Treme* takes all of its episode titles from song titles, but this one serves a dual meaning when thinking about the pantemporality of the show. Not only is it signaling that the show takes place during Mardi Gras, but it is a precise signal: *all* on a Mardi Gras day. This is the only episode title, and therefore the only episode of the entire show, that allows the viewer to completely situate the diegetic temporality with perfection. A Season Two episode, “Carnival Time,” establishes the narrative of that episode in and around Carnival, but it does not indicate how much takes place before or after Carnival in the same way that we know “All On a Mardi Gras Day” takes place entirely on that day.

These markers help the viewer maintain some narrative temporal trajectory, but they only provide *just enough* to do so. *Treme* has a great number of scenes that take place at night, which is perhaps no surprise considering the lively evenings in New Orleans. After those night montages of multiple character narratives end, and the show shifts to day time scenes, the viewer understands that time is now moving forward, but it is never entirely clear how much forward the show is moving. Is it the next day? A week



later? These questions remain unanswered until our next marker in the show, which then allows us to reorient ourselves into the show's narrative temporality. It then clouds again, and we remain in those clouds until the next marker, and so on.

A good example of this plays out over a three-episode stretch in Season Three. Starting with Episode Five and running through Episode Seven, *Treme* simultaneously keeps the viewer grounded temporally, while also keeping that temporality uncertain. Episode Five, "I Thought I Heard Buddy Bolden Say," starts with a camera panning over some Santa Claus figurines in an office where Desiree is making copies. As the scene continues the viewer can see other Christmas decorations on the walls behind her. Starting out, we can understand that this episode will take place around the winter holidays. While we do not know the specific day or time of this episode, we can at least understand generally where the characters are at temporally. Over the rest of the episode, time becomes more precise with the various characters all eating their respective Christmas dinners, and the viewer now knows exactly when these moments are taking place. In these instances, the material and the formal facts of the show's temporality are happening at the same time. We see the material events of the characters' lives, but they are marked by the formal date associated with Christmas dinner.

The next episode, "Careless Love," moves this precision back again into a more cloudy state. We know that it takes place after Christmas, but how far after is unclear. At one point in the episode Albert is scheduling his chemotherapy and tells the woman scheduling it, "Not before Mardi Gras... Ash Wednesday or later" (*Treme*, "Careless Love"). Again, the show gives us enough to situate generally, but not as precisely as it did in the previous episode. Mardi Gras took place on 20 February in 2007, so we know

that this episode takes place sometime after Christmas but before that date in February. That is as specific as this episode allows viewers to orient themselves temporally. This is an episode that exists almost purely in the material facts of the story-time, with little to no formal facts shown.

The last episode of this short temporal arc, “Promised Land,” returns viewers to the specifics of time that they lost in the previous episode. The first line of dialogue spoken in this episode comes as Toni is trying to get a specific judge to sign off on a document for her. The woman working in the office tells Toni, “He is the duty judge this week, but it’s the Friday before Mardi Gras” (*Treme*, “Promised Land”). This episode immediately situates the viewer in a specific temporality with specific formal facts. Since this is one of the aforementioned marker episodes, using Mardi Gras as the temporal marker in this instance, it is not unique in doing this. What is unique is both how the show frames this marker episode in this season as part of this series of specific-vague-specific temporalities, and also in how this episode allows the previous episode to become itself specified even more clearly, but still not precisely. Just over ten minutes into the episode, we see Sonny sitting on the steps of the Lambda Center, where he has started to attend Narcotics Anonymous meetings after he fell off the wagon at the end of the Christmas episode and spent the majority of “Careless Love” in various states of intoxication. Another man comes out of the Center and tells Sonny, “Congratulations.” Sonny replies, “On what?” The man then says, “Two weeks, right? Two weeks is two weeks. Give yourself some credit” (*Treme*, “Promised Land”). Because the previous episode ended with Sonny realizing he needed to seek help, and with him speaking with his girlfriend’s father, we can retroactively assign that episode a more firm temporality of

about two weeks ago. This is an instance, which happens throughout the show, in which *one episode contains the formal facts of a different episode*. Again, though, that episode exists in the cloudy state, so it can never be fully ascertained, but it is interesting that a future episode allows the viewer to return to a previous episode and assign it a revised temporality. It is uncertain still, because as viewers we still do not know how soon after speaking to his girlfriend's father that he started treatment, or if he was counting any of the days prior to that meeting towards his sobriety. But it is far more precise than what the episode originally gave the viewer. This follows right in accordance with the show representing the pantemporality in this manner, and does so in ways similar to how *Salvage the Bones* and *Beasts of the Southern Wild* approached it: often the present is made sense of through looking to the past or thinking about the future. Here, we are given an instance where the "present" of "Careless Love" is vague and uncertain, but once we move to the future with "Promised Land," its more detailed temporality also allows us to refine that previous present into a more precise timeline.

Similarly, this episode also allows us to orient ourselves as scenes move from day to night to day. As explained earlier, most of the time we as viewers cannot fully establish whether the show moves right into the next day, or whether it is jumping forward a few days or a week or even a month. "Promised Land" uses a referent made in a previous episode to situate the movement of days in its temporality. In that earlier episode Antoine was having a discussion with someone about his band marching during Mardi Gras. Antoine responded by saying they would not be marching in Mardi Gras, but would be participating in a parade on the Sunday before Mardi Gras. When "Promised Land" moves from the specific Friday before Mardi Gras mentioned at the beginning of

the episode into Antoine's middle school band marching, the viewer can maintain that precision of temporal movement. The band is seen marching just before the audience sees the scene with Sonny talking about his two weeks of sobriety, which again resituates that previous episode more specifically, with him being two weeks sober starting on the Sunday two weeks prior.

The way that *Treme* seamlessly flows from precise to cloudy diegetic temporality reinforces the parallels of that temporal experience with actual survivors of Katrina. In particular, this ebb and flow situates it differently than the other texts I have examined in this dissertation by mirroring the long process of recovery: just as people felt as if things were returning to normal, something else would come in and shift or alter that normalcy, serving as a reminder for the slow process that recovering from Katrina would be, and in many instances still is. *Treme* peppers in moments into the narrative that also reinforce this parallel. Albert, as he finally starts making progress on his house, is diagnosed with cancer. LaDonna is continually working on rebuilding her bar, but is faced with personal attacks, various court dates related to those attacks, and her bar being burned down and then rebuilt again. Toni and Sofia must deal with the suicide of Creighton, and with police harassment. This is just to mention a few ways that the show throws a wrench into the individual characters' recovery narrative arcs over the show's run.

As the third season closes out, the final three episodes continue this movement of reference to the past and present events of the show in order to (re)establish the temporality for the viewer. This requires the viewer to watch the show pantemporally, continually using what is discussed in one episode to make sense of something in another episode. The experience of watching the show becomes an experience in pantemporal

convergence, as futures signify pasts and presents, and the present is cloudy and only becomes clear by remembering the past or waiting for the future. In Episode Eight, the end of April is the date set for the trial related to LaDonna's rape; as mentioned earlier, this trial is shown in Episode Ten, the finale "Tipitina." When LaDonna is telling Larry about the trial date, she mentions something that happened on "Monday Gras" night; she is referring to the incident shown in Episode Seven in which a young man sat in her bar lighting matches in a threatening manner.

It is not only temporally adjacent events that get situated either. In Episode Nine of Season Three, Toni is meeting with the FBI agent that Terry has been working with (though, she is unaware of them working together), and she says to the agent, "About a year ago, he comes to my office asking for two shell casings I had in my possession" (*Treme*). This is in reference to the Season Two episode in which Terry got the casings from Toni and used them to help identify whether or not his police department was messing with evidence. As she talks to the agent, she then says, "A few weeks ago, I got a city judge to release the Abreu and Seals files to me" (*Treme*, "Poor Man's Paradise"). This is in reference to the opening of Episode Seven, which we knew then was the Friday before Mardi Gras, so now we can ascertain that Episode Nine takes place a few weeks after that, and that it has also been about a year since the Season Two episode that Terry took the casings.

It is not just the third season that gives viewers these signifiers, either. In the first season finale, a postal worker is shown saying, "Six months and I'm back" (*Treme*, "I'll Fly Away"), thereby allowing us to not only concretize the narrative within the overall trajectory of Katrina (six months), but also to the opening of the first season (three

months after that opening) and to foreshadow what comes next, with the second season beginning fourteen months after the storm. This means about eight months have passed between the finale of season one and the beginning of season two. It is also interesting to me that *Treme* begins each season with a marker for how long it has been since the storm, rather than from the previous season's events. This again forces the viewer to insert themselves pantemporally as they watch the show if they wish to continue with a clear narrative temporal understanding. Season Two, Episode Two, "Everything I Do Gonh Be Funky" brings up issues with public transportation still not having been addressed more than a year after the storm, and then in the finale of that season Jeanette is thrilled to see the streetcars running again. She is walking down the street with Susan Spicer, a New Orleans based chef here playing herself. As they walk a couple of bells can be heard, and Jeanette stops in her tracks, saying, "What the fuck?! They're back?! When did they come back?!" Spicer then replies, "December. But just from here on Canal up to Lee Circle. Beyond that, the rest of the line's still closed" (*Treme*, "Everything I Do Gonh Be Funky"). This dialogue marker not only temporally situates the current episode with previous ones, but it also indicates and references the slow recovery of Post-Katrina New Orleans.

According to Spicer, the December she is referencing would be 2006, and an article from 2016 on NOLA.com titled, "New Orleans Public Transit Halfway Back 11 Years After Katrina: Report," shows just how slow that recovery is, and can be. Not only is this recovery slow, but it also negatively effects poor communities far more so. As the article explains, much of the transit rebuilding has been primarily for the streetcars and the few bus routes that run through the heavy tourist areas of the city. However,

New Orleans also continues to struggle with questions of equitable access to transit among its residents, with a poverty rate hovering around 28 percent... In its third annual “state of transit” report, Ride New Orleans highlighted that an average public transit rider can only access 11 percent of the region’s jobs within a half-hour commute, while an average driver can reach 89 percent within that time frame. (Rainey)

As I discussed in the previous section, like so many other imbalances related to race and class within particular spaces, the recovery process affected poor people of color far more adversely than it did those with access to resources like those found in white communities. Here *Treme* links its pantemporal viewing experience with direct reference to a particular issue facing those poor communities of color, creating a way for viewers to understand those connections and parallels clearly.

On their own, individual episodes can be vague and hard to pin down temporally, but by viewing *Treme* pantemporally and connecting all of these time stamps of dialogue, markers, and the few visual time signifiers, such as the title cards at the beginning of each season, the viewer can concretize that temporal experience of the characters more firmly. It is never precise, because the pantemporal event-space does not allow itself to exist in just one, straightforward temporality. But if the viewer thinks pantemporally while they watch, it does become more focused. Interestingly, *Treme* also asks the viewer to do something with its pantemporal viewing that neither *Beasts of the Southern Wild* or *Salvage the Bones* was able to do as clearly: look to the future. While I have shown that those texts certainly ask us to think about how our present might impact the future, *Treme*’s use of this referent temporality specifically requires the viewer to do so if they

wish to continually remain clearly situated in the show's temporality. Without a constant awareness of what might lie ahead, precise narrative temporality is lost.

Lastly in this section on *Treme*'s temporality, I want to take a look at how the show's use of multiple character narratives is a unique choice for representation of the pantemporal event-space. While multiple, overlapping character arcs is not a new convention in storytelling by any means, I think it is worth exploring how they can be seen as a representation of pantemporality converging. Over the course of *Treme*'s four seasons, and using the core cast, there are twelve individual narrative arcs, though many of those are obviously intertwined: Toni and Sofia Bernette are mother and daughter; Delmond and Albert Lambreaux are father and son; Davis and Annie are dating each other. Even though some characters have narrative arcs that are closely aligned with each other, they still have individual narratives as well. I am thinking of these individual narratives as their own individual temporalities experienced by the characters throughout the show, but they are also individual temporalities that the audience can track and identify as they watch. As the show progresses, not only do the closely intertwined story arcs converge, but there are also moments, typically at least one per season, in which a majority of the twelve main characters have their individual narrative arcs converge with the overall narrative and the space of the show. Interestingly, these convergences of narrative lines often converge in the above-mentioned temporal markers, like Mardi Gras or Jazz Fest. Additionally, I will be looking at the aforementioned musical montages as another version of these narrative temporal convergences, albeit ones that do not have the characters converge diegetically in the same space.



The first of these narrative convergences happens in the aforementioned “All on a Mardi Gras Day” episode of the first season. This one is also interesting for the ways that it, too, sets up the music montage as a form of narrative convergence as well. As Mardi Gras day begins, and the characters are about to converge there, the show has Creighton Bernette start playing the Professor Longhair song, “Go to the Mardi Gras.” This song continues to play over the rest of the montage as we see each character or group of characters either preparing to head to the Mardi Gras celebration, or arriving there. “Go to the Mardi Gras” also becomes itself a referent point for the show, as the song is used in nearly the same manner in each of the show’s episodes, which take place on Mardi Gras. The only time the show cuts away from the music during this montage is when they cut away to Albert, who is lying in a bed in prison, due to his squatting in protest of the tearing down of the projects. This separation from the convergence means that when the viewer sees him, the music is not playing. His narrative temporality does not converge with the other characters’, and the music cutting away when we see Albert, and then starting up again as it cuts back to Antoine and Desiree cooking near the parade route, represents that disconnection from the convergence for his temporality.

Beyond establishing the groundwork for the musical montage convergences, this first Mardi Gras of the show also gives us a clear visual and spatial convergence of those narratives as well. As I will discuss shortly, the musical montage serves as a way of converging them when diegetic space separates the characters. Here, however, I want to look at a couple of instances in which the show brings characters together visually into the same space on the screen at the same time. What is interesting about these convergences is that they do not necessarily mean that these characters are interacting

with each other. In many of them, I would argue, the characters themselves do not recognize these convergences, while the audience can. The show does this by showing characters passing in front of other characters as they walk by or by using establishing shots to situate the characters spatially before moving into their individual narratives more closely. Once the convergence is established, we can recognize how these temporalities are coming together, while also understanding how they remain separate as well, which is what maintains their pantemporality as I see it. Remember, the pantemporal event-space is an event that takes multiple, individual temporal experiences and allows them to converge into a singular experience in which all of them can be felt and understood together, independently and collectively. Important is that even as those temporalities converge, they still retain their original individuality as well. Here in these narrative convergences, *Treme* demonstrates this connected separation immaculately.

In this Mardi Gras episode, then, the show begins with the musical montage, which connects the characters sonically, but still visually represents each of their temporalities separately throughout the montage. The visual convergences begin when Jeanette is working her pop-up restaurant and the Bernette's walk by and stop to grab some food, and the very next scene not only establishes why this is the first convergence of the show, but it also connects it directly to the way that this first Mardi Gras after Katrina was a convergence for the narratives and temporalities of actual survivors. In this scene, LaDonna is walking through a crowd when a woman who was working for the city in the case related to the request for documents related to her brother Daymo stops her to apologize. As they begin talking, the woman tells LaDonna, "What a day, huh? I'm seeing so many people I haven't seen since the storm," to which LaDonna replies, "Me

too—[they're] just in for the day, all the way from Houston, Atlanta” (*Treme*, “All on a Mardi Gras Day”). Mardi Gras 2006 was a major event for Post-Katrina New Orleans, with many news outlets all across the country covering the event as it happened, as well as speculating about its size and impact in the days leading up to it because of the mass dispersing of people away from New Orleans after Katrina, and their inability, and/or reluctance, to return. All of those individual narratives of Katrina survivors were separated from the collective narrative spatially, but Mardi Gras allowed many of them to converge in the same way that the show converges the characters individual narratives.

This episode continues to converge characters into the same screen space, with LaDonna later running into Antoine, who steps in as she is being drunkenly harassed by the man she fired for not fixing her roof when he said he would. Davis and Annie have their first meeting, and the rest of their day sets up major elements of their relationship with each other over the rest of the show's run. Just after their initial conversation, which ends with Davis quoting the Professor Longhair song, the song slowly starts building volume until it is heard on the soundtrack again as the two of them walk away from the camera, dancing arm in arm. It is worth reminding here that the song diegetically began out of the speakers at the Bernette's home, yet it continues non-diegetically throughout this convergence. The rest of the episode, while not directly linking multiple characters in the frame, still does an excellent job of establishing various locations, like streets and bars, in order to connect the characters in those locations. In addition, the actions and behaviors of the characters throughout this episode also establish a link between them in this moment in time. Regardless of the entirely visual convergence, we can understand

that Mardi Gras has united these individual temporalities into this larger, overlapping event that brings them together.

The next major convergence comes in Season Two, Episode Six, “Feels Like Rain.” At the end of this episode a second line parade lead by the Pigeon Town Steppers brings many of the characters together again. We first see Sofia at the start of the parade with a couple of her friends. As the parade begins, and the crowd follows along behind, we again see Sofia and her friends, and not far behind her Nelson is dancing through the street as well. The show then cuts to Toni and Terry walking along as well, near the back, alongside the police escort. While this scene does not connect the same number of characters as the Mardi Gras episode in Season One did, it still visually represents a convergence in which timelines overlap. It is also linked to a major event in New Orleans, albeit a much less minor one than something like Mardi Gras. Yet, Toni still comments during the parade that she is happy to see that it was still able to happen that year, a comment that again continues the show’s pantemporal reflection of recovery post-Katrina.

The way the show connects these character narrative temporal convergences to its use of temporal markers like Mardi Gras or second line parades demonstrates its continued awareness of the pantemporal event-space, both within its diegetic temporality and for the temporality of the viewers’ experience. In other words, not only does the show offer up representations of pantemporal convergence of the seemingly independent temporalities of the narrative and the viewer, but it also converges those temporalities into another pantemporality of narrative and consumption. Here is where the show again allows the temporal experiences of the story-time, discourse-time, and observation-time

to happen on the same level. Much like *Salvage the Bones* asked readers to consider their temporal experience of reading the present continuous temporality of Esch, *Treme* insists that the temporality of the narrative be experienced simultaneously, through these representations, with the temporality of watching the show, so that viewers may orient themselves pantemporally. This orientation is crucial to recognizing what Post-Katrina texts ask of us as consumers of the narratives, particularly those readers who did not experience the storm first-hand. As I discussed in the introduction, the way Post-Katrina literatures replicate the pantemporal event-space is what allows them to create a paralleled experience for the reader, following the work of Felman and Laub, thereby instilling a similar trauma as they consume.

I want to look at one more character narrative convergence before I move into the musical montages as convergence. This last narrative overlap occurs in the Season Three finale, which I discussed other elements of earlier. Near the end of this episode, many of the characters are attending a benefit at the Blue Nile for LaDonna to rebuild her bar after it was burned down. Toni, Sofia, Terry, and Annie are the only characters of the twelve major ones who do not appear at some point during this benefit. The scene begins and unfolds like a typical narrative convergence as I have described it so far. Characters are established in various ways as being at the benefit, therefore existing in the same physical space diegetically as each other. Many of them have conversations, even more directly linking their narratives, but overall it is a fairly standard convergence to the ones I have described above. However, this scene finishes with a particularly interesting use of camera tracking over a single take that really solidifies it as a firm, multi-character temporal convergence. After cutting away to Davis sulking at home after he left the

event, the show cuts back to a shot of Antoine's band playing at the benefit. The camera then pans away, through the crowd, and rests on a mid-shot of LaDonna who starts walking towards the camera as it follows her movement, keeping her in frame and not cutting away. As she walks by Sonny and his fiancé, the camera stops following her and holds on them for a short period. The camera then starts panning left away from them, until it matches the movements of Nelson as he walks through the crowd. It continues to follow him as he goes over to where Janette is cooking for the benefit, and all three characters enter the shot just as LaDonna hugs Janette and Nelson excitedly throws his arms in the air. The camera holds there for another few moments, where we see Nelson dancing while Janette hands LaDonna a plate of food, which she takes and starts to walk away. The camera follows her back over to near the bar where we first saw her, and Albert is there waiting for her, asking if he can give her a ride home. She agrees and the camera follows them as they leave the bar. When the two of them reach the door, the camera pauses to watch them exit just as Desiree enters, and then it follows her as she makes her way towards the stage to watch Antoine, who is still singing the song that has been the diegetic musical soundtrack for this entire shot. After she settles into the crowd, the camera pans to the right behind her, until the frame is filled with her head on the left, Antoine in the center, and Delmond on the far left playing trumpet. The scene then, finally, cuts to a reverse shot showing Desiree dancing as the song plays.

This entire uncut shot sequence takes approximately two minutes to unfold. As can be seen by my recap, nine major and minor characters make an appearance in that single shot, some together, some separately, but because the show chooses to not cut away, it is representing that convergence in a very unique way. Not only does the lack of

cuts or edits establish a singular perspective for all of those temporalities to converge into, it also establishes the *viewer* as that perspective. This scene could easily be argued to follow the same structure and rules that I have argued the other narrative convergences do; the characters are established as being in a particular space at a particular time, and their individual narratives are therefore converged into that diegetic space and temporality. However, the choice of not cutting means that this is one of the few instances where the show's diegetic temporality and the viewer's watched temporality *are exactly the same*. *Treme* here adds an additional element to the above-discussed convergence of diegetic and consumed temporalities by not simply mirroring or paralleling it, but making them exist in the exact same time frame. Just as the show's real act time and fictional act time overall closely aligned with each other in other ways, here the show makes that overlap between the two direct and precise.

That it does so while a song plays diegetically is not without mentioning. In fact, its use of a single song to do this returns me to the show's use of musical montages to both converge and disrupt the narrative temporalities of the characters and viewers. While the uncut scene at the end of Season Three uses a clearly diegetic song for the soundtrack as the scene unfolds, the other musical montages are not as clear in where the diegetic sound becomes non-diegetic or vice versa. In that scene Antoine and his band are playing the song at the time and for the duration of that single shot sequence. The "musical montage" that Season One uses begins and ends with LaDonna's brother's funeral music, but it cuts away from the diegetic sound of that music during the flashbacks of what people were doing to prepare for the storm, and only returns to it when the show returns to the funeral.

The musical montages that close out Seasons Three and Four follow a similar trajectory as these other ones, but they play out slightly differently. They still use a single song to overlay with the montage that appears on screen, but in these instances the events portrayed on screen do not align with the temporality of the song. The temporality of the song is known; each is roughly a few minutes in length. The diegetic temporality of the events that we see visually represented become extremely clouded and unclear, far more so than in any other moments that the show clouds our understanding of its temporality. Not only that, but the songs begin and end diegetically. It is only those moments in between that are clouded and unclear, but it also allows these montages to literally become pantemporal. In each, the person who starts the song playing exists within the temporal space of that song, but they also are shown beyond that temporality when their moments appear in the montage, along with the other characters' narratives.

To explain, I want to quickly run through each of these montages. In Season Three, Albert is seen at chemotherapy with headphones in his ear. The song comes through diegetically in that muffled way that film and TV represents a character listening to a song via headphones. The song playing ends, and Albert wakes up and selects another song on his iPod, "Tipitina," which begins again in this muffled way. The camera pans down to an unfinished piece of his costume that he is beading, and the song becomes clearer and clearer, until it is finally playing unmuffled for the viewer and the show cuts a shot of Toni and Terry saying goodbye to Sofia as she leaves for college. The musical montage continues, as we see events in each of the characters' lives: Jeanette's restaurant is up and running; Antoine is teaching band; Toni meets with the FBI; Sonny gets married; Annie moves out of her place with Davis; Nelson meets with people in



relation to the Jazz Center; and so on. The details of these events are not important. What is important is what happens as the musical montage finishes. Just as “Tipitina” ends, the show cuts back to Albert, now working on more beading and stitching for the piece of his costume that the camera showed at the beginning of the montage, and the camera continues to pan around him as he works. In this montage, Albert’s short-term temporality that coincides with the length of “Tipitina” converges with the long-term temporalities of the future. *Treme* shows us what will happen to those people, but we are not sure when, exactly, those events occur. We have a clear temporal experience in Albert’s listening to the song and working on his costume converging with the less clear temporal experiences of the other characters seen during the montage. The show again asks viewers to watch pantemporally, though this time it does not ask it in order to clarify, but to cloud.

Season Four’s musical montage, also coming at the end of the finale, works similarly to Season Three’s. Davis is back working at WWOZ as a DJ, and he first gives us another temporal marker, as one song ends and he gives a pitch for Jazz Fest tickets. After a brief conversation with his station manager, he introduces the song that will play over the montage:

Hey, do you know how sometimes you hear a song that you’ve heard a million times before, and maybe you’re even tired of hearing it, but this time, maybe because of something you’ve been through, or maybe because of something you now understand, you hear that song again—maybe it’s a new version, maybe not—but you realize that there’s a fresh world in there to be heard? Yeah. Me too.  
(*Treme*, “To Miss New Orleans”)

The song that begins to play is, again, the same song as the episode title, “To Miss New Orleans.” The way that Davis introduces this song reinforces its role as a mechanism of convergence. It connects the song directly to the experiences of Katrina survivors and the characters’ narratives as they mirror those experiences, and it also connects the viewer into that fold as well. He is not only addressing the listeners of his radio show, but also the viewers of *Treme*, particularly when talking about it being “something you now understand.” This is a moment in which the show again asks us to think pantemporally back to what we have seen before, to use not only the show’s narrative, but also to remember the previous musical montages and the ways that they set up convergence.

The rest of the musical montage plays out like Season Three’s, with one small change that solidifies it as a pantemporal representation. In Season Three, Albert is the bookend of the montage, but he does not appear in the montage itself. His narrative timeline is again separated from the rest of the characters, similar to how the music cuts away when he is in jail during the Season One Mardi Gras convergence. “Tipitina”’s montage also disconnects him, which I would argue is because of his uncertain future. As he is bookended by his chemotherapy, the show’s choice to not include him in the montage is, in some ways, a foreshadowing of Albert’s death in Season Four. Again, *Treme*’s pantemporal awareness asks the viewer to significantly consider the future. “To Miss New Orleans” has Davis at WWOZ bookending the musical montage, similar to how “Tipitina” framed its montage in that season. But Davis makes an appearance during the montage, unlike Albert’s absence in Season Three. On its own, this is not terribly significant, but considering the montages together, which Davis asks us to do during his song introduction, asks viewers to remember previous montages and the various ways

that they (1) establish and work with pantemporal convergences and (2) how they differ from each other, with those differences being a key element to understanding the show's representation of the pantemporal event-space. It is only in the final moments of the entire series that we are given a clue to this through Davis's introduction, and the fact that the clue comes so late asks us to think about the cycles of experience. It wants us to return to the beginning and to think about how *Treme* uses music not simply as an ode to New Orleans' culture, which it certainly does, but also as a mode of representation for pantemporality. In returning to those previous montages we can then see how the pieces were already there, that those montages were always working pantemporally by converging and reflecting and thinking to the future.

I want to close out this section with a reiteration: to fully grasp *Treme*'s pantemporality, we have to watch pantemporally. This is challenging, and that challenge is part of the temporal disruption that occurs and disorients the viewer. When we consume a film or TV show, we typically do not need to do this. The narrative unfolds over the course of the experience, and, even in cases where a non-linear narrative is used, we can still generally track and keep time. Unlike *Beasts of the Southern Wild* or *Salvage the Bones*, which both allow the reader to experience the pantemporal event-space by either visually representing it, as in *Beasts*, or by constructing the text in such a way that it exists pantemporally, as in *Salvage the Bones*, *Treme* utilizes pantemporality both in its construction and its consumption. It uses material and formal facts to mark time to keep the viewer on a general path, but it disrupts and clouds that path throughout. It makes us feel simultaneously safe and chaotic as we track the narrative temporalities of the show's main characters. Stories intertwine, sometimes asynchronously, and narratives converge

with each other, either diegetically or through musical montages, and the show constructs the pantemporal event-space through these. However, *Treme* raises the pantemporal experience for the viewer as well, by connecting them directly to the overlaps, references, and foreshadows in order to maintain their own understanding of the overall diegetic temporality of the show. In doing so, *Treme*, more so than many other Post-Katrina texts, bridges the temporal experiences of testifier and listener, making those two experiences converge as well. By converging what De Toro refers to as real act time and fictional act time, the impacts of these testimonies are far stronger than they might otherwise be.

### ***Treme*, Realism, and Testimony**

Now that I have shown how *Treme*'s pantemporality closely aligns the temporal experiences of survivor testimony with the listener of those testimonies, I want to examine what some of those specific testimonial links are. Much like I did in the previous chapter, I will be looking at how the show utilizes and/or incorporates the stories and experiences of Katrina survivors into its narrative. Some of the elements that the show uses are similar to how I discussed them in relation to *Salvage the Bones*: personal narratives addressing particular issues, which the show also addresses. However, *Treme* also takes a slightly different approach to how it brings in testimonial narratives into the narratives of the show. Many of the events in the show are recreations of, or references to, major events that occurred in New Orleans, and most of the main characters have a "real world" inspiration. Because the show is ultimately focused on a realist portrayal of Post-Katrina life, it also wants to portray those elements of testimony in as real a way as possible. In other words, *Treme* is one of the few Post-Katrina texts that is concerned with sharing the stories of survivors, but in a sharing that undervalues what those stories

mean to the survivors. Compare this with my discussions in the Introduction, particularly the section devoted to the levee myth construction, and Felman and Laub's arguments that testimony is not fully worried about recording objective history. *Treme* is complicated in its relationship to testimony though, because even as it seeks to replicate that realism, it still fictionalizes, and some critics have called attention to this, particularly with how the show romanticizes and overlooks certain elements of New Orleans politics and culture.

Over the remainder of this section, I will examine some of these realist testimonial components of the show, along with taking a closer look at how the show is both effective and ineffective in relating those testimonials, at least from a purely narrative perspective. As I have shown above, the show does a better job of connecting the testimony to the listener through its pantemporal elements rather than through simply retelling those testimonials, and so this section will look more at how the show is utilizing testimony to construct its narrative, rather than how that testimony is then related back to the viewer. As I close out this section, however, I will briefly return to my analysis from the end of the section on pantemporality to again reflect on how *Treme* asks the viewers to connect themselves to the experiences of Katrina survivors.

Several of the characters, as mentioned, have real-world counterparts that served as inspiration. On the outset, this appears to give the show a direct line as a means of disseminating the testimonies of those people and their experiences. Antoine is loosely based on Kermit Ruffins, a New Orleans trombone player, who also appears as himself many times throughout the show's run. Janette is based on Susan Spicer, the local chef

who also makes an appearance as herself in one episode that I briefly described earlier.<sup>24</sup> Local civil rights attorney Mary Howell inspired the character of Toni, and Davis McAlary is a version of Davis Rogan, who is also listed as a producer and consultant for the show. These people, all Katrina survivors, participated in the show as a way of sharing their stories. In speaking with the *Times-Picayune*, creator David Simon spoke about how much he emphasized to these real people how they were simply an inspiration, and that the show might portray them in particular lights that were not how they saw themselves. Simon is quoted in the article, telling Rogan,

Look, you know that I love a lot of the aspects of your existence that you're giving me. It's great stuff. Steve Zahn is going to have a field day. But you also know the writers are going to write fictional stuff. I'm not saying that the guy's going to crawl through the sewers and (have sex with) an alligator, but he may end up doing stuff you don't personally agree with. *He certainly will not represent anything close to the reality of your life.* (Walker, emphasis mine)

While Simon's comments seem to connect to Felman and Laub's work with testimony, in that he is less concerned with objective reality, his insistence that it will not represent anything close to that reality is also problematic. I would argue that the show moves too far in the other direction. Even as he uses these people as inspiration for these characters, his comments also seem to indicate that he cares little for their actual testimony to come through. Rough, general experiences are portrayed, but no concrete connections to the trauma of the event. As a result, the show keeps testimony in a state of limbo. On one hand, as I will look at shortly, it does utilize and mirror the testimonies of Katrina

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<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, both Ruffins and Spicer appear in scenes in which they converse with their fictional counterparts, which could perhaps be read as another moment of testimonial convergence.

survivors, both those who worked with the show and others who simply shared testimony. In this way, *Treme* is effective in connecting itself to the testimonial elements required of Post-Katrina literature as I see it. On the other hand, it also seems to care more for realism, or some particular versions of reality, than it does with listening and caring about the experiences of actual Katrina survivors and their stories. Dori Laub explains that “when one’s history is abolished, one’s identity ceases to exist as well” (Felman and Laub 82). *Treme* wants to tell its own “objective” version, one that fails to fully account for many complicated elements of Katrina, even as it tries to make use of them. As a result, these realist elements of its testimonial style seem almost exploitative rather than productive. They exist to build a plot, not to testify as well.

For example, *Treme* utilizes some major newsworthy events that occurred in the years following Hurricane Katrina. Sometimes these events are referenced or mentioned in an offhand way, simply as a way to remind viewers that the show is situated in the “real” world, or to, as I explained in the previous section, mark time as it progresses forward. At other times the show takes these events and folds them into particular characters’ narrative arcs, making them a direct part of the show’s overall narrative. It is in these moments that the erasure of testimony seems to take over, and the show in some ways exploits these stories to establish its realism. Over the next couple of paragraphs, I will look at two of these real events, the scandal involving the New Orleans Affordable Housing Corporation (NOAH) and the investigations of the deaths of people at the hands of police during the storm, and how the show portrays them on a surface level, never really allowing for the full testimony to come through. These stories are simultaneously positive in that the stories reproduced through the television show allow for some

element of testimony to be heard, and negative in that they are either utilized to produce narratives for people not connected to the actual stories or because the ways the stories are shown are too objective to actually convey the personal, emotional experience of that testimony.

The first event I want to look at as portrayed by *Treme* is that of the NOAH scandal. This scandal involved the NOAH corporation and funds that were meant to go to rebuilding homes. An article in the *New York Times* explains, “Instead...money appears to have gone to politically connected contractors who did little or no work on the houses. In some instances, the contractors were paid even when it was volunteers who did the gutting work” (Nossiter). These misused funds directly affected people who were among the poorest in New Orleans, as the program was designed to help those people rebuild their homes so they could move home. However, many houses were not ever touched, or had minimal work done, yet the contractors who did the work were able to keep the funds directed to them. Five people were ultimately convicted of crimes related to the scandal. *Treme* focuses on the NOAH scandal in Season Three of the show, and it directly links two of its characters to this narrative arc. First, Nelson and his redevelopment contractor firm catch wind of the shady dealings between NOAH and its contractors, and he decides to take advantage of the program, although he does say that the big difference is that his firm will actually do the work and do it well. Second, Desiree, in a season that finally gives her a more prominent role beyond the nagging girlfriend to Antoine, confronts the NOAH scandal head on when her mother’s home is one of the homes that was taken advantage of. In this case it was marked by NOAH as needing torn down, which subsequently happens, and as a result she takes on an activist role in this season, speaking



out against the program and its exploitation of those people who still owned homes in New Orleans, but who were unable to, or chose not to, return after. These individuals owned these homes and plots and were not consulted before they were destroyed.

*Treme* takes a critical approach to NOAH that comes from ideas not unlike Naomi Klein's work in *The Shock Doctrine*, which I have discussed previously. The NOAH scandal becomes a narrative on the show about private companies taking advantage of poor communities in the wake of a disaster to reshape the space towards their preference. Here, we are given a story of companies who want to tear down homes in order to rebuild newer, more expensive homes, which the previous residents would not be able to afford, igniting gentrification into these areas. The show's critical approach to this topic is commendable, and it is certainly a positive use of the testimonial aspects of these experiences as a way of creating awareness for this scandal, which many outside of New Orleans might not be familiar with otherwise. However, the show also takes a simplified approach to this criticality, by exploring it only through two characters who are also critical of it. I am not implying that the show should have portrayed the NOAH side with equal gravitas, but that its arguments against it are too simplistic and obvious, and it therefore becomes simply a narrative tool to give these characters something to do, rather than having these characters mirror the complicated testimonial experience of being in that moment. What I mean by this is that, similar to how I argued in the previous section, the show uses its temporal distance from the events to its advantage. Nelson and Desiree behave as if they have our knowledge from the future, rather than reacting to or being in that moment in time. It seems odd that both Nelson and Desiree would have both been critical of NOAH as it was occurring. Nelson and Desiree, rather than being two version

of the same side of a coin, could have served as opposite perspectives into the event, with Nelson being on the negative side of this coin. He could have served as a way for viewers to see just how exploitative and dangerous these types of ideologies were after the storm. Instead, Nelson, even as he is driven primarily by financial gain, is still portrayed as an otherwise positive figure closely aligned with Desiree as an activist, because he actually fixes and rebuilds the homes he is contracted to, rather than just taking the money and sitting on the work.

Again, I want to reiterate that calling attention to this NOAH scandal does have some positive elements. It was a tragedy that deserves attention, so that similar practices cannot happen again. That is what I argue Post-Katrina texts, and their use of testimony, seek to do: relate the past so that mistakes can be corrected for the future. However, *Treme* only treats it as a surface issue, mentioning it just enough to move that element of its plot along, or to help characters such as Desiree or Nelson grow and evolve. It never fully allows itself to dig into, or attempt to understand, the complete and complicated experience of uncertainty and confusion that would have been experienced by people at that time. In doing this, *Treme* falls victim to what Felman describes as a failure of testimony to address the perpetrators. Felman explains how what she refers to as three categories of witness—victims, bystanders, and perpetrators—are each “differentiated not so much by what they actually see...as by what and how they *do not see*, by what and how they *fail to witness*” (207-8). In other words, it is not how each of those groups sees the event differently, but how each of them influence and affect the testimony of other groups. These gaps are partially responsible for how perpetrators can remain invisible (209). By failing to testify in a way that fully portrays one group of witnesses, here those

individuals who are exploiting the space to make money and change the identity of that space, those perpetrators are veiled and partially protected from the full impacts that testimony could bring upon them. *Treme* fails to see and fails to witness that group.

Kornelia Freitag, however, argues that *Treme*, by utilizing variations of regionalist storytelling, gets away with this uncomplicated approach to its use of these stories. She defines regionalism as,

[a]n authenticating strategy that relies on creating mixed, even contradictory messages about a region and its inhabitants... On the one hand, local color is closely related to, or even a subcategory of literary realism... On the other hand, local color—and this is what distinguishes it from other forms of realism—depends on highlighting regional cultural *difference* from the national (supposedly) more encompassing norm... In other words, enabling a touristic gaze was an important part of the narrative.... (65)

I would add that, because of this complicated relationship between what is real to those who are there, and what is real to those outside of there, this adds more to how I see testimony itself becoming complicated in *Treme*. The show is for people both inside and outside of New Orleans, and as a result, it must balance accordingly. Freitag continues, “Regionalists have always tampered with (i.e. “sanitized”) real-life evidence in order to produce empathy by way of nostalgia in the reader” (68). In other words, *Treme*, for Freitag, is not erasing the testimony from these events, but is simply untangling them in order to construct that empathy with those who did not experience them firsthand. I do not entirely agree, nor do I entirely disagree, with Freitag’s assessment of this sanitization that *Treme* does. Her assessment allows for some freedom to read *Treme* as sharing

testimony subjectively, but I am not sure I see the show fully doing that. Again, I think the show tends to erase the testimony for the sake of the event, rather than having the testimony be the impetus for the narrative. It is more concerned with relating what happened, than with why it happened or how it affected those it happened to. *Treme* seems afraid to fully explore or invest in the testimony of those who survived, and instead seems content to dip a toe, just enough that it technically can be read as commenting on those things, but never going far enough.

Similarly, when *Treme* spends nearly its entire four season run, in some way or another, dealing with the death of individuals at the hands of police in the days after Hurricane Katrina, it also seems to not want to fully invest in those stories. The character of Toni spends nearly the entire run of the show, in some way or another, working on investigating and prosecuting police involvement of the shooting deaths, and subsequent cover-ups, of three different people. The first case covers LaDonna's brother Daymo over the first season, a case that begins as a missing person but ends with the discovery that he died under suspicious circumstances during the storm. During seasons two through four, she works off and on with Vincent Abreu (Ned Bellamy), whose son was killed in a grocery store immediately after the storm, while searching for groceries. The final case is the only one based on an actual, real-world story, that of Henry Glover, in which Toni helps reporter L.P. Everett on his investigative reporting of the incident. It is this last instance that I want to look more closely at, because of its use, and similar erasure, of an actual event unlike the first two, which utilize testimony only as inspiration for fictionalized events. L.P. Everett's character is based on reporter A.C. Thompson, who went to New Orleans to investigate Glover's death for his story, which appeared in *The*

*Nation* as “Body of Evidence.”<sup>25</sup> Thompson’s article quotes Mary Howell, the aforementioned real-world counterpart of Toni Bernette. Glover was an African-American from the Algiers area of New Orleans whose body was found in a burned Chevy Malibu belonging to William Tanner four days after Hurricane Katrina. Tanner was a neighbor of Glover’s who had driven Glover, who had just been shot by Officer David Warren, and Glover’s brother Edward King to a nearby elementary school, which had been set up as a medical relief station during Katrina. Eventually, police officer Greg McRae set fire to Glover’s body while it was inside of the Malibu, where it was later discovered.

In *Treme*, the third season devotes a majority of both Toni and L.P.’s time on screen to the investigation into this death. However, none of the people from the actual events are brought in to play themselves, which happens at other points throughout the show. Mary Howell and A.C. Thompson are both fictionalized. Glover is mentioned by name, so he is technically a part of the show, but his family and friends are portrayed by actors. Later, when L.P.’s article is published, he shows up to give Glover’s family a copy of the *Nation* magazine, and the article itself is seen. We are shown the actual issue and article as it originally appeared, again establishing some element of realism into the show that is immediately distanced once we recall that it is also a fictionalized version of realism.

I suppose, then, this is my issue with how *Treme* handles testimonial narratives. The show, unlike other texts, does not simply allude to or take inspiration from the testimonials of others. It actually takes the event and changes it, changes those who lived

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<sup>25</sup> Thompson’s article provides a much more detailed description of the events than I do here.

it, into fictionalized actors in the events. If they are going to frame these stories around the actual events, why not allow people to play those real-world individuals instead of characters inspired by? After all, *Treme* has no issue with having people play themselves on screen in other instances, including a disgraced councilman (Oliver Thomas) who resigned from New Orleans city council after it was revealed that he took bribes and kickbacks. It becomes pseudo-documentary at that point, both marking the event as true while at the same time fictionalizing it. Samuel views this element of the show, particularly with Simon's involvement, as praiseworthy in its journalistic integrity. Samuel writes, "Simon is perhaps conscious of not deterring from the core message of his text and remains true to the journalistic intent—to tell a story, as it is without regard for expensive and creative grammar" (36). I, however, disagree with this sentiment, because it fails to account for testimony's role in Post-Katrina literature. The story is important, yes, but it should not overpower the context or emotional trauma of those who experienced it, simply to become a narrative device. Samuel argues that *Treme*, precisely because of its journalistic integrity is what drives the activism of the show. While I would agree that the show does present a progressive politics, the way the show does so is problematic. Samuel himself points out why I think this is problematic, when he argues that *Treme* "positions the creator at the heart of the text" (35). The ways that Post-Katrina literature utilizes narratives is never just about the creator of the text, nor should their perspective of the event overpower the testimonial aspects of it. This limits the scope of the stories, and, to return to my arguments with Jellenik from previous chapters, it places them solely on the local. Jellenik saw a move from Katrina stories as moving away from the local and into the universal. With *Treme*, I would argue, we have a text that is so

focused on the local that the universal becomes lost. As a reminder, Post-Katrina testimonial literature is most effective when it can move seamlessly throughout that spectrum.

Glover's case is covered in Lee's *If God is Willing and Da Creek Don't Rise*, and even contains interviews with King and Glover's sister Patrice, as well as Howell and Thompson discussing their involvement with that case or with previous police misconduct issues, as was the case with Howell. That, of course, is an actual documentary and is one that is primarily concerned with hearing from, and gathering the testimonials of, Katrina survivors. Yet their appearance and testimony in the documentary also serves as a reminder for how *Treme* adapts and alters their story, again reinforcing this truthy fiction that the show sometimes utilizes. When we see actors portraying them, rather than having them participate in the show, it becomes jarring and seems exploitative. "Their story matters, but they do not," the show seems to say.

Perhaps, though, this is intentional, and does, in fact, follow along with the myth building that occurred immediately following the storm, which I have discussed and referenced throughout this dissertation. After all, they are retaining a kernel of truth and again give the stories the power to be disseminated to a wider audience. Yet, I still have pause in how *Treme* does this. It is different than other Post-Katrina texts, in that it uses these specific events to establish realism, while at the same time undermining that realism by overly fictionalizing the events. J.M. Tyree argues, "*Treme* often substitutes relationships to real life and splashes of local color for points of narrative interest, a confused strategy since the show is more of a confection than its plethora of docudrama-ish allusions would suggest" (24). Compare *Treme* to how Jesmyn Ward utilizes her own

family's experience during and immediately after Hurricane Katrina to inspire her own story. There are bits and pieces that form the basis and general structure of her story, but the actual events and players are entirely fictionalized for *Salvage the Bones*. As a result, her use of testimony exists in that space of myth building more firmly, and the original stories are therefore able to become much more than their objective historical truth. It is what allows them, to paraphrase Glen Jellenik, to become universal.

In *Treme*, the audience is made aware of the realness of the event made fictional, which then undermines these stories and therefore ends up reminding them that they are simply seeing a recreation of actual events, a reminder that this is someone else's story, separating viewers from it. For *Treme*, testimony is less about what these stories can mean or do and is more concerned that they tell some version of the truth. In this way the show falls victim to what Felman refers to as a "making of a silence," which she describes as "not a simple absence of an act of speech, but a positive avoidance—and erasure—of one's hearing...in the refusal not merely to know but to *acknowledge*—and henceforth respond or *answer* to—what is being heard or witnessed" (Felman and Laub 183). As a text that seeks to translate testimony, *Treme* fails because it does not truly listen to the full testimony. As it recodes the testimonial narratives of survivors, it simply retells the events, but in doing so reinforces the fact that it has not fully listened to those stories. Tyree explains, "Historical fiction, especially historical fiction based upon very recent events, must do much more than bring news already received" (24). The objective history of the event is not the full history of the event, and listening to testimonials of those traumatized by the event is the only way to unlock that full history.



Of course, all of this is not to say that *Treme* does not utilize testimony, just that it does so less effectively, at least from a narrative standpoint, than other Post-Katrina texts. What I would like to do for the remainder of this chapter is look at some of the ways that the concerns and issues brought up by Katrina survivors in their testimonies are concerns and issues that the show does address in a more complete manner than the ways I have outlined above. In other words, the rest of this chapter will follow more closely with how I analyzed *Beasts of the Southern Wild* and *Salvage the Bones* and those texts' use of testimony. These testimonials in *Treme* are ones concerned with the elements that the show is so often praised for beyond everything else: its representations of New Orleans music and culture. However, even those representations are still not without their flaws, particularly in the show's narrow approach to what falls under music and culture. Many testimonials, particularly those coming immediately after the storm, shared concerns that so much of what made New Orleans culture special would be lost in reconstruction efforts. The testimonials I will be connecting to *Treme* over the rest of this chapter all specifically worried that the town would become an altered version of its former self and that the sharing of culture from generation to generation would be lost, all as a result of cultural commodification and capitalist intentions with rebuilding the city.

First, I want to look at those testimonials that were concerned with how New Orleans would be reconstructed as a version of its former self. These testimonies shared concerns that link with Freitag's arguments about regionalism, in that spaces have both insider and outsider perspectives related to them, and often those are not fully compatible with each other. If the outsider perspectives can overpower the insider ones, then the reconstructed space is not entirely "true." These ideas could even relate to my discussion

in the previous chapter related to temporal entrainment, and how overlapping temporalities often sees one overpower the other(s). Similarly, I believe these perceptions of New Orleans run the risk of being overpowered with other, more powerful ideological constructions of what the space should be or look like. *Treme* addresses these concerns through Davis quite a bit, although as a white character who is annoyingly unaware of his own privilege, it is ironic that he becomes that voice for the audience.

One of the best examples of this sentiment in the testimonials I have read comes from Lloyd Dennis's interview in the *Saddest Days* collection. When asked about whether he could see someone returning to New Orleans after Katrina, he responds by saying that it depends what the city becomes. The interviewer then asks, "What are you afraid it's going to become?" to which Dennis replies, "I think New Orleans is going to become a kind of plastic version of itself, a Disney World version of what it was... [W]hen you start seeing white jazz bands, you know. It's kind of headed in that direction" (Dennis 11). Here Dennis seems to demonstrate an awareness of how outside influence can keep the parts of New Orleans culture that it is comfortable with, while removing those elements it deems undeserving of staying. This sentiment is not unlike many other similar comments that I have discussed throughout this dissertation, where many poor people of color felt as if they were told they did not belong, often because of the slow recovery efforts in which they felt as if they did not deserve aid or, as portrayed in *Treme*, because of situations like the NOAH scandal or the destruction of housing projects. New Orleans mayor Mitch Landrieu, in *If God is Willing and Da Creek Don't Rise*, said, "If this would have happened at Cape Cod, in Nantucket, or the Hamptons..." The documentary then cuts to Anderson Cooper to finish his thought: "If this was, you

know, washing ashore in East Hampton, there would—it would be outrage” (*If God is Willing...*). Their comments were in relation to the BP oil spill that occurred in 2010, but the sentiment is not unlike similar perceptions post-Katrina that I discussed in the Introduction. New Orleans carried a particular spatial identity that was othered by those outside of it, and so those outside felt as if they had an opportunity to shift it more in line with how they perceived the space should be. In some of these moments, this spatial restructuring was physical, as people were essentially ripped from their communities without much say in the matter, so that those communities could be reshaped to fit a “new and improved” concept of the New Orleans, one that did not consult the voices of those who lived there. It is as if New Orleans itself became painfully aware of its “out-of-place-ness” with the rest of the country, to paraphrase Timothy Cresswell. It also has to do with what Owen J. Dwyer and Derek H. Alderman discuss as the commemoration of space. While their work is concerned with how civil rights memorials are constructed, their points are still salient in this discussion as well, particularly with how they argue “the past is being portrayed selectively on and through the cultural landscape” (Dwyer and Alderman 23).

In these moments of post-disaster New Orleans, how that space is commemorated becomes altered, and therefore what the space can bear witness to is also altered. Dwyer and Alderman explain that “memorials bear *partial* witness to the past, calling attention to some portion of the narratives associated with a place, and, in the process, often obscuring other, sometimes competing memories (93). For post-Katrina New Orleans there was, unfortunately, little competition because people had either not returned from their forced exodus or they had little political or economic capital with which to bargain

for how that space could be remembered. As a result, housing projects were torn down and condominiums were put up in their place. What was once housing that poor people could afford was now double or triple what they had once paid.

In *Treme* these fears of a spatial re-identification post-Katrina are most often represented in the physical space, rather than in any cultural way. *Treme* primarily engages with these fears through the narratives of Nelson and Desiree related to NOAH and the contracting work in New Orleans after the storm. Of these, Nelson's narrative throughout the show seems to be the one that engages with these physical alterations the most, which is ironic considering he is contracting work to complete those alterations. He becomes the audience's way into these concerns, but unlike other moments of testimonial-to-narrative connections, his behaviors are not as clear in identifying the problems associated with them, other than the fact that he is a contractor in post-Katrina New Orleans, which is supposed to immediately frame him as "evil." *Treme* wants us to think about how there were individuals coming in to exploit and reshape particular spaces after Katrina, but the character who allows the audience to engage with that topic, Nelson, is not as clear-cut in portraying the dangers of those behaviors. It is only after he begins to distance himself from the growing NOAH scandal, and the show's inclusion of Desiree into that narrative, that it truly establishes a clear link between how actual Katrina survivors saw their spaces reshaped in the aftermath of the storm. Again, much of this reshaping was driven primarily by capitalist ideologies, which saw an opportunity to profit on both the clean-up and recovery efforts as well as in reshaping New Orleans to its benefit.

As Naomi Klein argues, “Most people who survive a disaster want the opposite of a clean slate: they want to salvage whatever they can and begin repairing what was no destroyed; they want to reaffirm their relatedness to the places that formed them... [D]isaster capitalists have no interest in repairing what was” (10). Because of this capitalist desire to make the city new, those survivors who tried to simply come home and fix what was broken had a difficult time doing so. Dan Bright, in *Voices from the Storm*, discusses his inability to get work fixing up houses, because he and his friend were not established contractors with connections. He said,

But in New Orleans, insurance people just don't want to pay people for their houses. So I'm on hold. I have the houses but people can't pay me because the insurance people don't want to pay them... And the work is out here, but I say this again, the corrupt officials, they playing on a larger scale with the contractors. They're getting kickbacks and giving the contracts to who they want to give to. And I'm not one of those big fishes where I can get a big contract. I have to wait and get the scraps... (Vollen and Ying 205).

*Treme* attempts to establish a couple of characters early on who represent a similar struggle to get work at contracting, including Albert and Nelson's cousin Arnie in the first season, but it does not do much with them in this regard. Albert, as I argued in the previous section, is a temporal link to how long and slow the process of recovery was, but that is for people attempting to rebuild, not for those seeking work to help others. Once Nelson arrives on the heels of his cousin's work at the beginning of Season Two, however, the show does establish this insider perspective into the world of those contractors who are running the show in this post-storm disaster recovery. Nelson is that

outside force made manifest. He comes in for one reason and one reason only: to profit off of the storm, no matter what changes he must make to the physical space of New Orleans. Even as his character might become more likeable over the course of the show, he constantly reminds the viewer that his driving force is making money. If he can help people while he does so, so be it, but money is his impetus.

The same fears of outside influence coming and altering identity can obviously be applied to culture as well, and that is also what Dennis is concerned with in his interview. However, I am not sure that *Treme* would help him feel less concerned about it. New Orleans is well known for its diverse culture, but many have argued that the show's portrayals of that culture are presented through the identity of what a tourist would like to see, rather than through the complex identity of the rich landscape that is New Orleans culture. Lynnell Thomas has written extensively on New Orleans tourism culture, including an article specifically on how *Treme* promotes and utilizes a form of televised tourism in its representation of the city.

In “‘People Want to See What Happened’: *Treme*, Televisual Tourism, and the Racial Remapping of Post-Katrina New Orleans” Thomas argues that the show reinforces the city's double consciousness through “the tension between how the city is experienced by those who live there and how it is presented to and perceived by those who visit” (“People” 215). This tension is exacerbated by *Treme* and the ways that it portrays the culture and the characters in a way that both historicizes particular aspects of black culture while at the same time depoliticizing them. Thomas writes,

In this historical moment of racial, environmental, political, social, and economic rupture, the battles over place identity are especially pronounced as emergent

tourist narratives invoke particular histories and memories (to the exclusion of others) and propose competing visions of New Orleans's past and future (216). According to Thomas, these tourist narratives of the city are based in a duality that disconnects the temporality of New Orleans in the moment of Hurricane Katrina, with an awareness of the struggles that poor people of color faced after the storm and a willful ignorance of the struggles that they faced before the storm. In other words, she argues, the past is a place for nostalgia and a desire to return to it, and the present-future of post-Katrina is a place situated in disaster, but the two remain disconnected through (televised) tourism. Even with these complicated issues of tourism as presentation, Thomas argues, "Nevertheless, Hurricane Katrina also thrust the images and stories of black New Orleanians into the national imagination, forcing past and potential New Orleans tourists to confront a black New Orleans that existed outside the tourist construction" ("Roots" 754). Unfortunately, *Treme*, in getting viewers to confront that cultural-historical memory, largely frames those arguments and references through its white characters' actions and dialogue.

As stated earlier in this chapter, Davis is the character who relays these fears to the audience the most. He becomes our surrogate for the ways that natives to New Orleans shared fears over outsider influence. He even literally becomes a guide to the culture of New Orleans when he begins giving his Jazz History Tours, although he is often corrected by tourists in the information he presents. Through all of his problems, though, he still acts as this surrogate and gets the audience to think about the erasure of culture post-Katrina. This is entirely problematic, to be sure, and I, and others, have major concerns about the fact that the show does this. However, in this moment I am

simply establishing that the show does, still, relate the concerns of Katrina survivors, even as it does so problematically. The first of these instances comes at the very beginning of Season One, Episode Two “Meet De Boys on the Battlefield.” As the episode opens, Coco Robicheaux is playing a song during Davis’s WWOZ radio show. After Robicheaux finishes playing, Davis introduces him and explains that they are at the “reconstituted, rededicated, relocated WWOZ in the completely soulless, faux French Market, a shameful shell and shadow of its former self” (*Treme*, “Meet De Boys on the Battlefield”). WWOZ was originally located in Armstrong Park, but was forced to move to the south end of the French Quarter after the hurricane. Davis and Robicheaux continue to converse about this move, with Robicheaux asking if they will ever be able to return to Armstrong Park, to which Davis replies, “I don’t think so, bro. I don’t see it. Not in the cards.” Robicheaux then says, “You don’t get the good ancestor vibe up here. All tourists and t-shirts” (*ibid*). Both men are concerned with how a staple of New Orleans culture has been forced to reconstruct itself after the storm into the space typically reserved for tourists, mirroring the concerns of Dennis that New Orleans would become a Disney-fied version of its former self.

Interestingly, this also leads me to one of the most significant ways that *Treme* actually succeeds in relating testimony, and it is because of what they do here that they did not allow to happen with other real-world connections. By having actual musicians come onto the show and play themselves, these moments also become a way for them to testify to their concerns and experiences. Sometimes, like the above scenario, these musicians are talking about New Orleans culture and how to keep it intact. By allowing these musicians a space with which to tell their stories, even though those stories might



be scripted, it directly links their experience and concerns to the reality of New Orleans culture. It is one way that the show's realism is successful in maintaining a testimonial angle. One of these musicians, Kermit Ruffins, appears many times throughout the show playing himself. Ruffins also participated in the *Voices From the Storm* collection, which mirrors the concerns that the show lets him speak through his "character" on occasion. One such concern that he shared relates to how this cultural erasure also links to issues of preservation. Ruffins said, "Every time I think about the music, I always think about way, way back and what it was like and why and who and all that stuff... I always think about how it happened" (Vollen and Ying 216). His sentiments here, shared also by musicians throughout *Treme*, show an awareness of himself not only within the culture, but also within the long history of that culture. They also tie into Dwyer and Alderman's work with commemoration, if we consider cultural memory in the same way that they consider spatial memory. To clarify how I see these working in conjunction, I want to reiterate how they spoke about competing views in creating memorial commemoration and link it to testimony. Just as Felman argued how witnesses are differentiated by what they fail to see and how perpetrators can remain invisible as a result, so too, perhaps, can commemoration, if it fails to fully account for as much of the history as possible, also end up erasing portions of that history as a result. These concerns about cultural erasure are not simply rooted in the present moment, but are linked to the long past that brought them there and to worries about how that erasure might alter them for the future.

This testimonial theme of culture as it spans generations is arguably what *Treme* excels at over its four seasons, though it certainly comes at the expense of many of the other issues facing Katrina survivors, which only get the surface-level treatments I have

discussed previously. The most significant way that *Treme* and testimony overlaps in this way relates to the Mardi Gras Indians, focused on in the show primarily through Albert and Delmond. Many of the testimonies in the *Saddest Days* collection make mention of the impact and beauty that this cultural landmark has not only for them, but also for the city as a whole. One of these interviewees, who is identified as “Maulana,” said,

I don't think the younger generation is any less cultured than they were before. I still see, I still see the music being played, I still see the cuisine, I still see the kids dance... I mean the continuity of the culture is amazing, you know the second line is still the second line, the Mardi Gras Indian pattern of bead work and art work, and you know the very essence of that part of the culture of the street remains so. You know, it has not fundamentally changed. So I'm not sure that there has been a transformation of the culture itself...but certainly there have been changes in the economics of the culture you know within the city itself, and how the African American community accesses that. (12)

“Maulana” acknowledges that she still sees a thriving culture in New Orleans, but concerns about how economic factors might shift that culture are also present. This image of the Mardi Gras Indian is such a powerful cultural marker for many in New Orleans, and so there are fears for how that image might be exploited or redrawn.

In *Treme* this complex relationship between cultural marker and exploitation comes when Delmond comes up with an idea to merge modern jazz with the Indian chants, an idea he is reluctant to share with his father at first. Throughout the show, Albert represents the long, “pure” culture of the Mardi Gras Indians and he wants to see it preserved in as pure a way as possible. Delmond is a character who recognizes and

acknowledges that history, but who initially cannot see the importance and power in preserving that untouched history. How his father will react to this merging of the two cultures—old and new—becomes a bit of a running joke during that episode, with several studio musicians saying they want to be there when Delmond asks Albert to participate. They can already sense how negative his response will be. Ultimately, Delmond convinces his father, but he complicates his explanation for the financial aspects of the record. He explains to his father how the project is commodified, but he fails to be honest in how it does so. Delmond convinces his producer to give his father an advance on the album, which Delmond explains as the record already having pre-sold a significant number of copies. The album itself ends up selling mediocre, but Delmond never tells his father this. In this way, *Treme* mirrors “Maulana”’s complicated concerns about the commodification of that culture. There is simultaneously a need to commodify in order to preserve, but that commodification runs the risk of erasing or altering the cultural history of that thing.

Dennis also complicates the historical elements of the Mardi Gras Indians in a later part of his *Saddest Days* interview. In it, he directly links the history of Mardi Gras Indians to a history of oppression. He explains,

Actually I have a negative view of what a lot of people call New Orleans culture. I believe that it was the result of oppression. That the Mardi Gras Indians are like a scream from a people to say, I’m more than a porter. I’m more than somebody that cleans up behind other folks. (26)

Dennis seems to be indicating that a lot of New Orleans culture is so important and precious to so many people, because it is inherently one of the few things they can claim

as their own. This is something that Delmond has to realize later in *Treme*, but that realization really only comes when Albert is diagnosed with cancer. For the first time, Delmond is forced to confront how that history will be preserved. He is a successful musician, who has traveled the world and made albums. His own cultural creations have already been preserved through that commodification. However, when his father is dying, he understands that certain traditions and aspects of culture can only be preserved by keeping them local, because allowing others to have them might dilute them over time. He attempts to uncomplicate the commemoration by allowing it to become pure again, removed from the filtered and combined commemoration he sought to do on his album. For the first time, Delmond had to think towards the future in preserving his culture. Prior to this moment, his cultural commemoration was done for him through the music industry.

This generational cultural preservation is also the element of testimony that most closely aligns it with the show's pantemporality. Survivors were aware of this disconnect that they ran the risk of experiencing. With people forced away from New Orleans, how could they ensure that their culture could survive into the future? These testimonial concerns demonstrate an awareness of how the past influences the present, but it also shows how these survivors worried how their own present might not influence the future. If their culture is destroyed or altered beyond what they hope it might be, is that not also destroying that culture, or at the very least, calling into question "which stories...they embrace and which ones are rejected" (Dwyer and Alderman 21)? The capitalist ideologies that swept in to physically alter the spatial identity of New Orleans in the aftermath of Katrina had larger reaching impacts than just the alteration of the physicality

of the space, not that those impacts were not important or exploitative as well. These ideological influences also created a temporal schism that altered New Orleans' cultural identity as well.

*Treme*, although primarily focused on one particular cultural element throughout its run—jazz—nonetheless calls our attention to these physical and cultural testimonial concerns. In fact, its use of jazz, and the rich and complex history of that musical form in and of itself, could even be seen as a clear critical move for the show to represent these testimonies and the long generational concerns tied into them. Yes, New Orleans has more to offer than just jazz, musically speaking. Its bounce and metal scenes, both mentioned significantly less than jazz throughout the show, are vibrant, but they are also fairly new compared to the long history of jazz in the city. That temporal length is what gives *Treme* some redemption in its presentation of testimonials, because it is what allows it to link back to the show's own presentation of the pantemporal event-space as well. To clarify, *Treme* as a television show with episodes that ran over four years, allowed the temporal experience of those watching the show to experience a similarly slow, drawn out process. *Treme*, recall, is a show that, unlike *Beasts of the Southern Wild* or *Salvage the Bones*, was interested in replicating the long-process elements of the pantemporality, of allowing viewers to experience that long history for themselves. For *Beasts* and *Salvage the Bones*, they wanted to converge that long process down and allow it to be experienced in a short frame. Because of this, *Treme*'s use of testimony is similarly concerned with that long-term cultural history, and how we must be aware of as much of that history as possible in order to preserve it for the future.

## Conclusion

Even as *Treme* fails to fully embrace the testimonial style I argue is both common and essential to Post-Katrina literature, it still effectively utilizes testimonies in its narrative. On top of that, I have shown how its critical representations of racial and spatial privilege, as well as its use of pantemporality, actually allows what testimonies it does share (however complicated or incomplete they might be) to be more closely experienced by viewers as they watch. To reiterate a statement from the introduction of this chapter, if reading this chapter as a whole, seems as if I am overly complicating the matter, it is because I am still working through this myself. This text, much more than the other two, created the most problems for me as I felt continually as if I was both agreeing and disagreeing with myself. Much of that stems from *Treme*'s own limitations. Beyond its problematic relationship to testimony, my struggle points to the fluidity of Post-Katrina texts. Much like my issues with Jellenik's assessments of first- or second-wave Katrina texts as attempting to be too precise, *Treme* is also a text that struggles to be easily categorized. It is both an effective and well-received show that chronicles the lives of several Katrina survivors and allows those chronicled testimonial elements to reach a wide audience, as well as a show that struggles to actually give a voice to the testimonials of the silenced, the way that other Post-Katrina texts have done more effectively. Essentially, *Treme* could be doing more, and it could be doing the things it does better. It technically addresses the three elements that I argue Post-Katrina literature must contain, albeit only excelling in one of those elements as it provides a unique interpretation of the pantemporal event-space. As such, it belongs in the canon of this literature, but perhaps

can also serve as a guide for how simply falling under the umbrella of Post-Katrina literature does not automatically make a text unproblematic.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### AFTERWORD

It is 23 August 2018 as I sit down to write this Afterword. Thirteen years ago to the day Hurricane Katrina began to form as Tropical Depression 12 near the Bahamas. In those thirteen years, New Orleans and the Gulf Coast has recovered and moved forward in many ways, but the impacts of the political and cultural changes are still being felt and dealt with even now. A Google search for “Hurricane Katrina,” limiting the results to the past week, includes an article on an elderly couple who was finally able to return home; a story about the reopening of the last library destroyed during Hurricane Katrina, and the celebration of that reopening on 24-25 August 2018; a recently-released, long-term analysis of New Orleans’ shift to charter schools after Katrina; and an excerpt at *Salon* from a soon-to-be-released memoir by J. Malcom Garcia about his experience. The first lines of that *Salon* excerpt are, “The catastrophe of Hurricane Katrina feels like ancient history these days. Not to me, however” (Garcia). That, I think, perfectly sums up the long history of Post-Katrina life that the literatures I have discussed, as well as those I did not, explore. Most of us have moved on. Other tragedies and spectacles have caught our attention, and our distance from Katrina, both physical and temporal, allows us to easily forget. Those tragedies and spectacles range from other hurricanes and disasters to the political and cultural landscape we find ourselves in now in 2018 in the United States. It is difficult enough to keep track of the day-to-day news we are bombarded with, particularly when much of that news seems designed to distract from real, more important issues. Yet, as Garcia’s quote reminds us, the long disaster of Katrina is far from over for many people.



As a result of this, I have been reflecting a bit on this concept of *Post-Katrina* literature, and perhaps the problems with the naming of it as such. Throughout this dissertation, I continually mention how, for those who experienced Hurricane Katrina firsthand, that experience is still occurring. It is not ancient history, to use Garcia's words, but is still present. How, then, can something that is still happening be referred to as "post" anything? Perhaps I am simply being too pedantic and literal in this reflection, and that it is obvious that the "post" refers to the storm itself. But as I explained in the Introduction, I do think it is important to frame a difference between the storm itself and that long history of Katrina, which I define as those things that drastically affected survivors beyond just the damage the storm caused, such as government inefficiency, climate change, and issues of race and class. The storm itself is over and is "ancient history;" the damages caused by those other issues are still being felt and grappled with for many in the Gulf Coast. This is what causes me concern in thinking of anything as Post-Katrina. It is similar to concerns about identifying moments as "Post-Racial," or "Post-9/11." While someone could certainly argue that we can mark and identify particular, singular events related to seeing things in that way—the election of President Obama, perhaps, or the actual events of 11 September 2001—it is clear that the effects of the events we are supposed to be temporally after are still being felt. Racism is still ingrained in our systems and is becoming even more pronounced and open in the wake of the election of President Trump; our country's role as a world leader, and all of the negative economic and militaristic connotations associated with that role, is still in flux and I would argue that it largely has to do with many citizens' inability to ever confront the real implications of those economic and militaristic ideologies, and how they link to

why people might want to attack us in the first place. In other words, my fears related to marking the literatures of Katrina as *Post-Katrina* have to do with the inability to reckon with the past and its impacts on the present and future. We can never be “post-racial” until everyone in our society confronts the racist past of our country. Similarly, we can never be “post-9/11” until we confront the economic and militaristic practices that incited those who would attack us. Some of us do choose to engage with these histories, but those who benefit most from that hegemonic history choose instead to go about their business as usual, thereby perpetuating many of these exploitative and dangerous ideologies as a result.

Marking these major events as “post,” I think in some ways, gives those people an excuse to forget. Carolyn Forché, in attempting to define a “poetry of witness,” argues, “We all know that atrocities have taken place on an unprecedented scale in the last one hundred years. Such monstrous acts have come to seem almost normal. It becomes easier to forget than to remember, and this forgetfulness becomes our defense against remembering” (32). Yet, at the same time, it is these very literatures, created with and through survivor testimony, that force readers to confront and resist forgetting. They keep them from moving fully “post” and allow them to continually confront those issues that the initial event revealed. They, as Forché continues, “will not permit us diseased complacency. They come to us with claims that have yet to be filled, as attempts to mark us as they have themselves been marked” (32). Forché’s quotes come from the Introduction to her anthology of twentieth-century poems paying witness to genocides, world wars, localized wars, and struggles for civil rights from all around the world. The poems in the collection are all marked by their relationship to the traumatic events, but

are identified by Forche in language not unlike Felman and Laub's explorations of testimony, as she writes, "A poem that calls on us from the other side of a situation of extremity cannot be judged by simplistic notions of 'accuracy' or 'truth to life.' ... It will have to be judged...by its consequences, not by our ability to verify its truth" (Forche 31). I think the literatures of Katrina could easily be understood and included in this framework of "poetry of witness" for the ways that it utilizes testimony and myth-building in order to keep the event from moving into the forgotten.

Going forward, I see this dissertation functioning in several ways. First, I hope others will take up the mantle of Post-Katrina literatures and continue the work that I have done here, by looking at more texts that specifically respond to Katrina and improving and adding to what I have laid out. I am also very interested to see how other scholars who are more versed in feminism, queer theory, or post-colonial theory than I am can discuss how those issues are represented within this literature, as I have with the racial and environmental justice themes engaged with in this dissertation. I think *Treme* is ripe for additional analysis in these other ways, for the ways that it ignores, erases, or severely underutilizes those voices of immigrants and the LGBTQ+ community in its narratives. Many have focused on both *Beasts of the Southern Wild* and *Salvage the Bones* through a feminist lens, but I think there are several other texts that could work well in this framework as well. Additionally, I think it would be worth locating and exploring testimonials of survivors within those other communities, and similarly identifying the concerns being raised within their testimony and finding literatures that engage with those concerns.

Secondly, I think there are many ways that some of these concepts I have outlined, particularly my concept of the pantemporal event-space, can be applied more broadly to disaster studies in general, as well as to literatures that might arise out of specific future disasters. In the years since Hurricane Katrina, we have seen similarly revelatory large-scale disasters, such as the 2010 earthquake in Haiti; Hurricane Sandy hitting Eastern U.S. in 2012; Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria through the hurricane season of 2017, which saw more frequent and powerful storms than in the past; and now the recent Hurricane Lane, which has just finished making its way through Hawaii, with another Tropical Storm right on its heels that meteorologists say might turn into a hurricane at any point now. Of these, I think the earthquake in Haiti and Hurricanes Irma and Maria in Puerto Rico are the two of these recent events that parallel most closely to Katrina, particularly in how these events revealed governmental systems built-on economic inequality, and how those inequalities affect(ed) the recovery efforts after the disasters. Several people have already published<sup>26</sup> collections of journal entries of their experiences during Maria, a short story collection, and Naomi Klein has written a short follow up to her book *The Shock Doctrine*, called *The Battle for Paradise: Puerto Rico Takes on the Disaster Capitalists*, which specifically details how those same disaster capitalist practices and policies are affecting Puerto Rico in the wake of Hurricanes Irma and Maria. While many of these collections appear to be self-published, that might be an additional line of analysis in regards to testimony and witnessing. As I discussed in my Introduction, recent technologies such as cell phones with recording capabilities, increased access to the internet, and the growth of social media, allowed people to share

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<sup>26</sup> Many appear to be self-published, though.

their testimony during Hurricane Katrina with far more speed and efficiency than in the past. Similarly, the ability to easily self-publish, whether through blogging as people did during Hurricane Katrina, or through actual books that can be shared and sold on giants like Amazon is worth additional research and exploration, particularly for how those quicker-shared testimonials add to, and in some cases move away from, the temporal distance that Felman and Laub argue is crucial to the testimonial process.

Finally, I hope to continue this work on my own, by applying these concepts and new ones that arise to both my own scholarship as well as my pedagogy. One of the biggest limitations of my dissertation is that I am only looking at three primary texts, though I would argue that the testimonies I have addressed throughout should also be considered as some part of this literature. However, only having three primary texts is not nearly enough to truly solidify a definition of Post-Katrina literature, and so I will continue to apply the analyses laid out in this dissertation to more texts written in response to the storm, whether through conference presentations or publications. As new Post-Katrina literatures arise, I think it is also important to see how they well they fall under this umbrella that I am defining, but even more importantly, to see what they add and how they complicate it. As one example of this, I recently made the acquaintance of an artist and educator, who worked with a young boy to create a children's story about Hurricane Katrina. This book, *The Flood of Kindness*, is described in its summary as a piece of historical fiction that author De'Ante Webster wrote in third grade. After that,

Dee worked with artist...Laurie Marshall, to grow, refine and clarify the story.

They collaborated to honor those who lost their lives in Hurricane Katrina and to

recognize the valiant spirit of New Orleans. Their hope is to also strengthen young people who may experience massive storms in the future (Webster 1).

While the book is told in such a way to be understood by young children and as such does not fully engage or grapple with the complexities of the storm and its aftermath, the impetus for writing the book and the desire for it to function as a way to strengthen the future, demonstrates an awareness of the pantemporality of Katrina that I find hopeful. This book also demonstrates the lasting impacts of Katrina, both temporally and spatially, as Webster was around three years old when Hurricane Katrina hit and he is from Indiana, not New Orleans. At the risk of using this anecdote of Webster's story as evidence of a larger importance that Post-Katrina literature can play, I do think it is worth noting how hearing and learning about the storm is what drove him into action for himself. His experience seems to function through the ways that Felman and Laub explain the listeners' role in the witnessing, particularly for how the relationship between testifier and listener is a joint responsibility that "is the source of the reemerging truth" (Laub 85). The reemerging truth of Katrina is, at least partially, this literature, written through and in response to the objective event combined with the subjective testimony of survivors.

Webster's reasons for making his story also point me towards the importance of pedagogy for Post-Katrina literature and its function as keeping these stories and testimonies, and the issues and problems they relate to us, in the forefront of our consciousness, to not allow us to forget what happened. In hearing and learning about Hurricane Katrina in his class, Webster decided to create something of his own to be a part of that long narrative story. His desire to connect himself to that tragedy, and for his

connection to serve as a way for future people to then connect to it as well, embodies so much of what I have argued for these texts to do. As many have pointed out, Katrina was a story not just about New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, but it also revealed to us systemic political and economic inequalities that communities throughout the United States (and elsewhere) could certainly relate to. In teaching about Post-Katrina literature, I want my students to similarly situate themselves within the disaster, to begin to reckon with themselves as part of a system that could allow such a tragedy to occur. One way that I have done this already was through an exercise in which I had students write down a list of their most precious possessions: photos, stuffed animals, pets, mementos, etc. I then also had them write down a list of their most valuable ones: TVs, stereos, video game systems, cars, etc. I then divided the class up into about four or five sections. The first couple of sections are made up of one or two students, and then each subsequent section has considerably more students, with the last group itself making up a majority of the students in class. For example, if there were thirty students in the class, the first grouping would have two students, the second and third would have three students each, the fourth might have eight, and then the last one would be made up of the final fourteen students. These groupings are designed to mirror the economic diversity, and disparity, of pre-Katrina New Orleans. After I divide the students up, I then begin an exercise in which I have students free write according to the following prompts. First, I tell everyone that their most precious possessions are lost, either carried away in the flood or destroyed beyond salvage, and I ask them to write about how that might make them feel. This helps to set up the initial ideas of how everyone might have been equally affected by the storm itself physically. Yet as I have shown throughout this dissertation, the recovery and

rebuilding—as well as the time it might take to do so—affected communities differently, depending on their economic and racial demographics. That is where the second prompt comes in. I then continue asking students to free write according to several more prompts, based on their most valuable possessions. The students in the first group?

Congratulations, you did not lose any of your valuable possession in the storm. At the same time, no one else in the other groups has gotten anything back. I then explain it is a month later and that the students in the second group have gotten their stuff back, and the first group has even improved on some things. This continues where I reveal a new period of time (six months, one year, five years, etc.), and ask students to consider their experience in that moment and how long they have had to wait to replace or rebuild.

After each moment when I reveal a new prompt, everyone writes and has to contemplate several things: How does it feel to not have your possessions back but to see another group does? How does it feel to have your possessions back knowing others do not?

What would you be most concerned about, knowing either of those things, based on your role in that community? How do you think others might view your particular group? It was a unique way for me to get my students to contemplate what it might be like, but then to also parallel that contemplation with temporal components and then open into a discussion of how those issues arise and how the texts we are discussing engage with them.

I am also interested in examining other mediums beyond those that engage with Katrina through narrative methods. Photography, painting, sculpture, and games provide unique opportunities for engaging with the themes laid out in this dissertation, and can do so in ways traditional narrative cannot. One such work is currently on display at the



National Museum of African American History and Culture. A mixed media piece there, titled *After the Storm CNN*, by Floyd Newsom, is described as a “fragmented landscape of objects and images...[reflecting] the complex nature of this event and its hotly contested political and social aftermath” (Newsom). The piece itself is almost juvenile in its renderings of space, with little regard for perspective or the relationship between the objects on the image. The images that make up the piece seem to remain disparate, with little to unify them other than their shared space on the canvas. Here those disparate images seem to suggest a pantemporal convergence, in that the more we continue to engage with the work as a whole, the more we begin to recognize the patterns and connections between objects, even as the lines dividing the frame into four equal parts keeps them on their own as well.

I am sure there are many other perspectives and ways into the body of literature of Post-Katrina that I am not even thinking of or covering. I look forward to seeing those things emerge, and to see how others continue what I feel is important work, both within literature and for society and culture, or, as Forche explains it, how these testimonial texts “register through indirection and intervention the ways in which the linguistic and moral universes have been disrupted by events” (45). The events related in poetry of witness, of which Post-Katrina literature could certainly fall under, disrupt literary and moral, societal conventions. As events move towards extremity, the texts relating those events must themselves match that extremity in order to replicate the trauma for the reader. These disruptions become new ways to explore texts and to explore culture as well. They give us new ways to think and talk critically about our world, and to keep these events in memory. As I officially close out this dissertation, I want to return to several poignant

questions that Shoshana Felman asks, which I think reiterate the importance of keeping these stories alive and resisting the urge to move fully “post,” while at the same time highlight the work involved in doing so. Felman is writing about that moment in which some past traumatic event or problematic behavior is made conscious for someone, what she refers to as “waking up.” She is specifically analyzing the problematic behaviors Paul de Man, who had written a column for a well-known Nazi newspaper early in his career, but who later went on to be a well-known thinker and literary critic whose problematic past was unknown. Felman asks,

But the question is: given this fatal political mistake, given such a radical failure of vision, such a lapse of consciousness experienced early in one’s life, how can one *wake up*? What would waking up mean? And what can one consequently do, for oneself or for another, not simply with the deadweight of the past but, specifically, with the mistake and with one’s own awakening? ... [H]ow *not to compromise* a truth which...no one can own but to which [one] can continue to wake up? How not to compromise the action and henceforth the process, the endeavor of awakening? (Felman and Laub 123)

Poetry of witness, Post-Katrina literature, and other texts that ask us to share in the trauma and testimony of others also remind us of our possible roles in the creation of that trauma as well, to question our own problematic pasts and behaviors that might have amplified or worsened the event and its impacts on survivors. As Felman explains, however, that must be a continual process, we must continue to awaken and remember the event and its impacts on those who would testify to it. It is not a pleasant experience to continually be reminded of these past events, particularly when we are made aware of

our own behavior's connection to it. Yet that is precisely why it matters. Our discomfort is minimal compared to the trauma felt by survivors, but our discomfort can move us to action, can keep us in that moment of awakening, so we might hopefully recognize, challenge, and change those behaviors and systems so that similar traumas are erased in the future.

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