

# OLD AND NEW MEDIA AFTER KATRINA



*Edited by*  
*Diane Negra*



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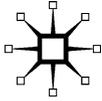


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DIANE NEGRA



## CHAPTER I

# INTRODUCTION: OLD AND NEW MEDIA AFTER KATRINA

*Diane Negra*

This book considers the media textuality of Hurricane Katrina, an event that signifies the radical eruption of incidents and images decisively outside the bounds of what is conceived as the American “way of life.” In its aftermath we can glimpse the ways in which citizenship, consumerism, and charity are coming together in new formulations, often in attempts to reinforce state-sponsored Christian sanctimony, the stigmatization of the poor, and the need to negotiate white middle-class guilt in such a way that national identity myths remain unthreatened. For many, Hurricane Katrina manifested not only a profoundly unequal national culture and the rupture of the social contract, it also seemed to lay bare the normalization of risk in American life. As Wai Chee Dimock has observed, Katrina stands as a public event “that casts into doubt the efficacy and security of the nation.”<sup>2</sup>

Representations of Hurricane Katrina cannot be read outside of a neoliberal context marked by “New Economy” market fundamentalism, state-supported assaults on the environment, intense anti-immigration rhetoric in a nation that still celebrates itself as a global beacon of hope for the downtrodden, the withering role of state care for the vulnerable, and various other perversions of democracy that have flourished in recent years. Hurricane Katrina is positioned at the intersection of numerous early-twenty-first-century crisis narratives centralizing contemporary uncertainties about race, class, region, government, and public safety. For instance, the 2005 New Orleans events gave dramatic evidence of the crumbling and under-maintained American public infrastructure; in this way they stand alongside the 2003 East Coast blackout as well as smaller scale (but heavily broadcast) events such as the 2007 so-called “urban tornado”

in which a hundred-year-old Manhattan steam pipe exploded, generating a large crater in midtown that killed one person and injured numerous others, and notably the I35W bridge collapse in Minneapolis a short time later.<sup>3</sup>

Nancy Tuana has observed that “A city is a complex material-semiotic interaction, and New Orleans rests at the heart of multiple interactions.”<sup>4</sup> In the context of the history of U.S. imperialism, New Orleans may be seen to have functioned as an internal colonial locale where the tensions of slavery, environmental exploitation, and economic exhaustion suffused urban identity well prior to Hurricane Katrina. The city has long maintained a distinctive status within the national imaginary, its “Old South” qualities enriched and particularized by Cajun and Creole influences that have been interpreted as local “spice” or in reference to the supernatural. Many of its contemporary Hollywood film representations draw upon and further such perceptions, often featuring intense, transgressive eroticism (*Obsession* [1976], *Angel Heart* [1987], *Wild at Heart* [1990], *Interview with the Vampire* [1994]) or the romanticization of corruption. In a film such as *The Big Easy* (1987) the local population is paradoxically represented as both criminal and compliant. Outside of a grisly murder scene an unruly mob of local citizens gathers, but their political concerns quickly dissipate in the face of an opportunity for recreation. “The riot has turned into a party,” a fellow cop tells police detective Remy McSwain (Dennis Quaid), who responds “I love this town.” Once we understand such representations as emerging from the need to manage colonial/imperial histories we can more fully track the ambivalences at play in New Orleans’ frequent depiction as resolutely, perversely local in an era of globalized connectivity.

Prior to Katrina, New Orleans maintained a singular status within an economy of carefully marketed lifestyle and tourism destinations. More than most cities, it sustained an urban brand conceptualized from the perspective of the non-resident and divorced from the daily experiences of average citizens. Once primarily seen as a place where European-American cultural affinities lived on and a “Caribbeanized” site of flamboyance, multiculturalism, and multiracialism, New Orleans was understood by many as a city whose economically anachronistic status was barely compensated for by tourism. The city’s historical and contemporary associations with gambling also dovetail with new narratives of risk as a feature of the national condition.<sup>5</sup> Geographical vulnerability (but equally important racial, class, and financial vulnerability) constituted a

key disclosure of the events of 2005. Moreover, Hurricane Katrina reverberates in a culture where so many everyday encounters are now tinged with risk, terror, anger, and competition; the increasingly authoritarian and majoritarian American emotional and financial culture as well as the possibility of alternatives to it could be starkly glimpsed in popular debates about whether New Orleans “deserves” to recover and whether its displaced population can be said to have the right of return. The inability to perceive issues of disability and ill health as constitutive elements of the vulnerability of many of those impacted by Katrina can be understood in part as a consequence of the “livestrong or die” mindset of heath triumphalism that has flourished in America in recent years, underwriting deeply classist pathways of access to medical care.

Naomi Klein has argued that “The images from New Orleans showed that this general belief—that disasters are a kind of time-out for cut-throat capitalism, when we all pull together and the state switches into higher gear—had already been abandoned, and with no public debate.”<sup>6</sup> In the early twenty-first century the narrative of dead, dying, or injured cities is sometimes counterbalanced by the spectacle of civic rejuvenation, philanthropy, and volunteerism (nearly always on terms that accord with dominant ideological keynotes and gender, race, and class hierarchies).<sup>7</sup> But the effort of rebuilding itself is open to commodification as may be seen in an entry in the long-running, high profile advertising campaign for flavored Absolut vodkas. “Absolut New Orleans” features a clogged highway lane going into the city with the Superdome in the background—in such a way urban rejuvenation is fused with “local spice,” and the promotion of a new Absolut product, a mango and black-pepper vodka (of all things) (figure 1.1).

In a study of consumerism and kitsch in relation to 9/11 and the Oklahoma City bombing, Marita Sturken has persuasively argued that contemporary American culture processes traumatic episodes of violence through the “tourism of history.”<sup>8</sup> Effectively, souvenirs and trinkets, reenactment practices, museum displays, and a consumerist popular culture steer the meaning of such events in patriotically sentimentalized and ideologically neutralized directions. While Sturken’s arguments are surely applicable in many ways to the commodification of disaster in New Orleans, they also need to be recast in this context, given that the unifying rhetoric of “homeland” upon which such consumer memorialization depends proved dramatically inapplicable to an event in which a majority of citizens found the government to



a mediathon of television coverage in September 2005, but in the numerous ways in which Katrina's legacy appears in a range of other media forms<sup>10</sup> for Hurricane Katrina remains a cultural event strikingly difficult to access independent of its media representations. As Aric Mayer has usefully observed, "To put the national Hurricane Katrina experience in perspective, fewer than several hundred thousand people witnessed the storm in person. For the other 99.8 percent of Americans, the disaster was a media experience with lasting implications for the public opinion and action."<sup>11</sup>

This collection of essays explores the relationship between Hurricane Katrina and a range of media forms, assessing how mainstream and independent media have responded (sometimes innovatively, sometimes conservatively) to the political and social ruptures "Katrina" has come to represent. Strikingly, some media coverage in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina neglected to adhere to established protocols and conventions.<sup>12</sup> In certain instances this material challenged assumptions about the malfeasance of those in poverty and of an always already criminal blackness. Some of the most dramatic evidence of such coverage could be seen on heavily conservative Fox News where anomalies occasionally began to crop up in the rote call and response systems between news studios and on-site personnel. Instead of validating a view of the situation shaped in the studio and according to ideological prescription, reporters such as Fox's Shepard Smith refuted anchors' attempts to recuperate events on the ground or to validate blatantly inadequate efforts at care provision for those impacted in New Orleans. Musician Kanye West's dramatic "off-script" moment during a September 2, 2005, NBC broadcast of the benefit *A Concert for Hurricane Relief* where he protested the racial disparity between black citizens accounted as "looters" and white ones deemed "supply gatherers" and bluntly asserted that "George Bush doesn't care about black people" furthered public awareness that in the period after Katrina dissenting voices were making their way into the media mainstream. Such moments of unruly subjectivity were not frequent but they tended to harden in public memory and conveyed an ideologically contestatory mood and tone. It is the argument of this book that after an initial frenzy of media coverage, efforts to impose conservative representational discipline over an event deemed ideologically problematic have played out over a sustained period of time.<sup>13</sup>

Emblematic of succeeding efforts to impose social and representational order in a fast-changing environment was a broadcast of Fox

reality crime series *America's Most Wanted* on September 10, 2005. Situating its longtime host John Walsh in New Orleans, the episode opened with a stark assertion of its own relevance, "our nineteenth season on the air kicks off with one of our biggest jobs... our mission to find the missing." Despite such rhetoric, close examination of the episode reveals that this "mission" is decidedly minimized in favor of the show's stock gambit of criminal apprehension. The broadcast insistently advocates on behalf of police, military, and rescue agencies, acknowledging neglect and disorder only to the minimum extent necessary and extolling that "there are stories of lawlessness and sin that erupted after the storm passed, but the bigger story is that compassion and kindness flowed like the Mississippi River" (the inappropriateness of such watery metaphors did not, apparently, register with series producers).<sup>14</sup> While using short segments of the show's national broadcast platform to allow separated family members to announce their locations on-air, the primary mandate of the special "Gulf Coast Recovery" episode was to stage criminal detection as social recovery. Accordingly the broadcast included a lengthy appeal to apprehend criminals who posed as contractors in post-Hurricane Andrew Florida, a profile of Mississippi police officers whose homes were flooded, introductions of police officers from other parts of the country who traveled to the Gulf region to help and the exhortation to help find two prison inmates who escaped incarceration after the storm. As Walsh puts it, "While the Mississippi police are helping their towns recover from the hurricane, you can help them by keeping an eye out for a few of their most wanted fugitives."

Aric Mayer has observed that despite the frenetic coverage accorded to it early on, post-Katrina New Orleans was a site "which seemed to defy and elude the available means of media representation,"<sup>15</sup> and I would argue that this unrepresentability produced a kind of unfinished agenda that lingered after the intense, immediate first phase of media coverage came to an end. It is this "unfinished business" that generates a particular representational urgency around Katrina and that a variety of media forms have subsequently addressed in the past five years. A chief goal of the essays here is to consider the ways in which Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath have/have not precipitated revision of the narrative and ideological codes of popular film and television. Do cataclysmic national events exert narrative pressure on even the most stable genres? Are certain film and television forms subject to change and contestation when representing the disaster or have standard codes and conventions proven resilient

enough to evade modification in the face of the ideological/cultural exposure Hurricane Katrina has come to represent? While some contributors to this book find that a post-Katrina representational environment gives rise to programming innovations (as Andrew Goodridge argues of the survivalist nature-reality hybrid series on the Discovery Channel), others assess textual forms as varied as the romantic comedy or the NPR broadcast that seem to cling doggedly to their established formulae even as the revelations of Katrina make many of their ideological precepts untenable.<sup>16</sup> A strong tendency in media representations related to Hurricane Katrina is the ascription of blame and even moral deficiency to the residents of New Orleans rather than to government agencies or corporate interests as Lindsay Steenberg shows in her discussion here of the frequently punitive treatment accorded to Katrina-impacted guest characters on prime-time television. Another common approach is to hype individual rejuvenation as a substitute for civic rejuvenation—a consistent device to effect this substitution is the personal or home makeover. In her essay here Brenda Weber considers the relationships in place between the Katrina legacy and the makeover as a primary televisual mode of the early 2000s.

As the foregoing examples suggest, the specific texts to be analyzed by the contributors to this book will roam widely across forms and genres. Case studies will traverse a range of texts from chick flicks such as *Last Holiday* (2006), documentaries such as *When the Levees Broke* (2006) and *Trouble the Water* (2008), and Katrina-themed episodes of prime-time television series such as *House*, *Bones*, and *Law & Order SVU*, to the landscape of cable news and the making of news personalities such as CNN's Anderson Cooper (for whom Katrina was a professional boon, perhaps the only high-profile white male public figure of whom this could be said) and disaster-themed programming on outlets such as the National Geographic and Weather Channels.

Diane Harriford and Becky Thompson point out that “Historical memory, because it is often unconsciously held, can frequently take the form of a haunting experience that follows, confronts, and interrupts people’s everyday actions even though it might not manifest itself in specific, identifiable memories.”<sup>17</sup> Although they do not come in for specific examination in this book, it is worth noting the emergence of a cluster of post-Katrina, Louisiana-set horror films including *Hatchet* (2006) and *The Reaping* (2007), which seem to process the horrors of 2005 in displaced forms and the appearance of film and

television series that conceptualize New Orleans as a site for communal and personal campaigns for justice and crime-solving (notably *Déjà Vu* [2006] and the Fox drama *K-Ville*). In general, media texts that have straightforwardly sought to adapt 9/11 style discourses of heroic “law and order-ism” to a post-Katrina context have failed to muster critical approval or to stir audience interest. This has proven true for television series such as *K-Ville*, which sought (with the cooperation of the NOPD) to celebrate fictional New Orleans police officers, and for films such as *Déjà Vu*, which crudely and desperately spins a terrorist plot to impose the agenda of “homeland security” in New Orleans, opening with a spectacular sequence in which a ferry carrying hundreds of navy personnel and their families (and sailing under a banner that reads “Katrina Only Made Us Stronger”) is bombed on Fat Tuesday. One of the earliest post-Katrina films with a New Orleans setting, *Déjà Vu* elides the realities of hurricane devastation by re-designating New Orleans as an investigative homeland space. By contrast, *Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans* (2009), about a police officer and former Katrina “hero” who becomes decadently corrupt, was generally positively critically assessed and pronounced a significant creative achievement for its star Nicolas Cage.

The proximity between Hurricane Katrina, the Indian Ocean Tsunami of December 2004, and the commercial success of Davis Guggenheim’s acclaimed documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* in 2006 moved public awareness of environmental disaster into the cultural foreground and arguably intensified a preexisting cultural posture normalizing the permanency of disaster. Analysis of the eco-disaster film after Katrina remains outside the boundaries of this project (and a full analysis of this kind would not only engage with Hollywood fictions and works such as the IMAX film *Hurricane on the Bayou* [2006] but could even encompass precedent texts that prompt a post-Katrina rereading such as the climate change disaster film *The Day After Tomorrow* [2004]).<sup>18</sup> One issue under examination here is how Katrina-related media at times adhere to and at times disrupt the tradition of Hollywood films (including examples such as *Dante’s Peak* [1997], *Deep Impact* [1998], *War of the Worlds* [2005], and *2012* [2009]) that take disaster as an opportunity to reconstitute the family.

Media responses to Katrina are more generically dispersed and thematically oblique than has been recognized. In this context it is crucial to understand Katrina as a media event whose meanings have been consistently fostered and furthered through the Internet.

Bearing in mind the important part played by the Internet to virtually reassemble decimated communities, friends, and peer groups after the storm, there is also considerable attention paid here to new media and the disparate textual material articulating the significance of the hurricane. Katrina-related YouTube content includes dramatic survivor videos such as those uploaded by the Guerra and Vaccarella families, memorials, survivor testimonials such as *The Truth About Hurricane Katrina*, urban video tours of decimated neighborhoods, and political calls to action. In this way, the site (launched just two months before the devastation of New Orleans) has come to serve as an “accidental cultural archive”<sup>19</sup> and potentially as an “enabler of encounters with cultural differences and the development of political ‘listening’ across belief systems and identities.”<sup>20</sup> In his essay for this volume Jeff Scheible turns to a set of more diffuse and less direct iterations, analyzing Katrina’s online presence as a means of better delineating the time and space associated with it.

Although it is not focused on in a sustained way in this book, it is important to acknowledge the scope and influence of a Katrina-influenced material culture—in this context we might consider, for instance, the early flexibility of merchandising protocols in New Orleans’ French Quarter that would seem to indicate that even vast civic trauma can be rapidly commodified. T-shirts on sale in 2006 in the Quarter with such slogans as “NOPD (Not Our Problem Dude)” and “I Survived Hurricane Katrina and All I Got Was this Lousy T-Shirt (And a Plasma TV, and A DVD Player, etc. etc.)” indicate something of the way that subjects such as police abandonment and looting can be transformed (though not without ambivalence) into commercial humor. More recently fleur-de-lis t-shirts and those reading “Be a New Orleanian Wherever You Are” and Ray Nagin keychains (such as the kind discussed here by Maria Pramaggiore) indicate the ongoing scope of Katrina-related material culture and merchandising. In his essay Dan Streible documents the case of murdered filmmaker Helen Hill, whose creative work was materially damaged by the flooding in 2005. Through Streible’s account, we gain a closer view of the activities of film restoration, the contours of an activist life, and the ways in which New Orleans has so often operated as cultural host for off-the-grid creative activities. A significant strand interweaving among the essays in this book involves analysis of the role of media not only in organizing public memory of Katrina but in shaping/directing affective responses to it. For example, in her essay Maria Pramaggiore examines the ways that

the reflexive “anniversarizing” of Katrina on media outlets such as National Public Radio has helped to shape emotional responses to the disaster, privileging sentimentality and recollection over introspection or analysis.

A consistent element in the essays that comprise this collection is the recognition that while Katrina represented an anomalous event in some respects, it has generally been made to conform very heavily to preexisting and ongoing narrative and ideological patterns. Its media presentation, for instance, adheres to an increasingly consistent U.S. regionalization of value and morality. These sorts of dynamics are evident in the contemporary disaster film, which from *Independence Day* (1996) to *Cloverfield* (2008) has proven itself deeply invested in staging the loss of certain cities in the process of defending/reclaiming the nation. Such cities are often dubbed collateral damage of a kind in a United States that must contend against new and unprecedented threats. The broader habit of differentiating which national zones are economically/ideologically vital and which are quiescent begs the question of what kinds of “ruin” we are recognizing in the destruction of New Orleans.<sup>21</sup> It further invites analysis of whether/how the ruining of cities is emerging as a premiere twenty-first-century American scenario of fear and fantasy.<sup>22</sup>

In the twentieth century the United States accumulated little historical experience of rebuilding after large-scale destruction. It did however gain considerable experience of repressing the unmaking of such American cities as Detroit, Newark, Providence, and Baltimore, all of which saw local economies and industries dwindle away. Given the cultural proclivity in the United States to trade in competitive strength/weakness dialectics, it is not surprising that a strong impulse is to expel faltering cities as damaged parts of the national body. A “boom town” logic helps to compensate for these losses as Americans are urged to migrate to new urban centers where prospects seem bright. In the last twenty years, dramas of competitive regionalism have tended to celebrate particular cities or regions as magnet sites—Seattle, Austin, and Las Vegas among others have consistently come in for this sort of mythologizing treatment. As James Lyons has observed of Seattle in the 1990s,

As the locale for a profusion of new technology companies, the most promising being the software behemoth Microsoft, Seattle appeared to be a model for the New American Economy, a hub for the sort of innovation, entrepreneurial spirit and élan that would lead the nation