Telling Katrina Stories: Problems and Opportunities in Engaging Disaster
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Like most others in critical/cultural and performance studies, we were trained to look at how discourses, sign systems, symbolic actions, and signifying practices of various sorts reinforce or alter relations of power. We learned that art (broadly conceived), criticism, pedagogy, and scholarship could be forms of engagement and intervention in those relations of power, although Stuart Hall convinced us that such engagement must be practiced “without guarantees.” The question for us was never should one be engaged? Rather, the question—always—was over the manner and means of engagement: What form should engagement take? How do we perform as teachers, artists, and scholars so as to be efficacious—without relying on or appealing to some extrinsic or transcendent discourse to serve as the alibi for our actions or as a guarantor of their “correctness” or “truth”?

Although these questions have been salient to some extent for generations of communication scholars, and while they seem to have become more urgent as we wrestle with the nature and extent of our engagement in forums such as this one, they acquire a new meaning and valence, a special force, if you will, in the context of crisis. And for us, the crisis that has had an enduring effect on our understanding of what it means to be “engaged” as scholars in communication and performance studies was precipitated by the disasters that followed Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in the summer of 2005. As we approach the fifth anniversary of those life-changing events, we would like to use this occasion to talk about the problems we face in keeping those events alive in public memory and in making them an ongoing issue for deliberation in the public sphere: and by “we” in this sentence, we mean literally those of us who reside at the site of the disaster. In short, then, we want to address the problems of talking about Katrina and the failure of the levees in New Orleans in the context of the burden of the relationship between scholarship and public/political engagement.
A great deal of ink—both scholarly and academic—has been spilled assessing the causes of and assigning the blame for what happened in Louisiana during and after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. As performance studies scholars, we look at such events in general in narrative terms, as a set of scholarly problems in and opportunities for storytelling. In this case, however, we find our scholarship “engaged” by an even more immediate need to take every available opportunity to talk about these events—literally, to tell “our” story. In what follows, we begin by using our lived experience with the catastrophe of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita to identify the specific problems that animated our own performative engagements. Following that, we offer some suggestions concerning the possible forms of such scholarly engagements.

The impetus to forget what happened in New Orleans, south Louisiana, and along the Gulf Coast has often seemed both willful and malignant. To many of us in Louisiana, President Bush’s 2007 State of the Union address was simultaneously shocking and wholly unsurprising. Given that he had devoted a mere 156 words of his 5,400-word 2006 speech to the disasters a mere four months after they had occurred, it was not in the least surprising that he would have even less to say the next year. But given that much of his State of the Union address focused on domestic priorities, and not a single word addressed the Gulf Coast recovery efforts, the signal as to where Louisiana fit into the national agenda was unambiguous. Indeed, history seems to be repeating itself as we write this, with government and industry in no apparent rush to mitigate the disastrous oil spill now coming onto our shores. Five years later and we’re getting that old familiar sinking feeling again. Thus, one problem we face is simply that of visibility: How should the engaged performance work against disappearance and willful or inadvertent forgetting?

The second problem is a concern over what should be remembered, what story or stories should be told. The problem here is twofold. First, there are lots of stories to tell, lots of stories that have been told already, lots of stories that could still be told. It is not a matter of our being like Walter Benjamin’s shell-shocked soldiers returning from the trenches who had experienced something beyond their capacity to narrate. We all have our stories, we all have something to say, but we have not as yet reached the point where there is anything approaching a consensus on what “our” story should be, which stories will be most pedagogically and politically efficacious. Where does one start? Our colleague at LSU, John Protevi, stated the matter with seriocomic hyperbole. To understand the Katrina disaster, he says,

you have to understand the land, the river, the sun, the wind (air), and the sea; you have to understand earth, wind, fire, and water; you have to understand geomorphology, meteorology, biology, economics, politics, and history. You have to understand how they have come together to form, with the peoples of America, Europe and Africa, the historical patterns of life in Louisiana and New Orleans, the bodies politic of the region. You have to understand what those bodies could do, what they could withstand, and how they intersected the event of the storm.

And he is right. But that kind of understanding is not going to happen overnight, and it is not likely to come from Anderson Cooper or the Discovery Channel.
The other aspect of this problem is that in today’s “memory culture,” as Andreas Huyssen dubbed it, the fear of being forgotten or “disappeared” operates in a different register. As Huyssen notes, “the more we are asked to remember in the wake of the information explosion and the marketing of memory, the more we seem to be in danger of forgetting and the stronger the need to forget. At issue is the distinction between usable pasts and disposable data.” When so many Katrina stories have been told already, and when most of them seem to operate at the level of disposable information or information overload, a kind of malaise sets in—what some call “Katrina fatigue.” In memory culture, how do we discriminate between the memorable story and the factoid? How do we avoid flattening out the experience and “counsel” of the storyteller, to use Benjamin’s term, to mere information or sound bites? And what is the point of trying to tell the story, anyway, when much of the nation seems already to have made up its mind about us and has grown bored or frustrated with us?

Louisiana had the reputation for being hopelessly backward, corrupt, or “dysfunctional” (as then-FEMA head Michael Brown famously put it) long before August 2005. And when Louisiana’s inability to function after the disasters was displayed prominently on TV for all the world to see, day after day, month after month, it is not surprising that we now see Mardi Gras floats and automobiles and pickup trucks and T-shirts festooned with the slogan, “Louisiana: Third World and Proud of It.” What was lost in all of this, of course, was the fact that Louisiana conducted the most successful evacuation in the country’s history, and that social solidarity and collective civic action (rather than the much-publicized depredation, lawlessness, and disorder) were the immediate reality of our lives in the days following the disaster.

Yet, one often sees the kind of gallows humor displayed in the images and stories that appear in some of the documentary accounts of Katrina, such as Spike Lee’s When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts (2006). Sometimes we all feel like cutting loose and ranting, like the St. Bernard Parish residents featured in Lee’s film or like Evangeline Parish resident Mark Krasnoff, quoted at length in a story by Mike Davis and Anthony Fontenot that appeared in The Nation:

Look, Louisiana is the same as any exploited oil-rich country—like a Nigeria or Venezuela. For generations the big oil and gas companies have pumped billions out of our bayous and offshore waters, and all we get back is coastal erosion, pollution, cancer and poverty. And now bloated bodies and dead towns.

People in the rest of America need to understand there are no “natural” disasters in Louisiana. This is one of the richest lands in the world . . . but we’re neck-to-neck with Mississippi as the poorest state. Sure, Washington builds impressive levees to safeguard river commerce and the shipping industry, but do you honestly think they give a shit about blacks, Indians and coonasses . . . ?

If our “leaders” have their way this whole goddamn region will become either a toxic graveyard or a big museum where jazz, zydeco and Cajun music will still be played for tourists but the cultures that gave them life are defunct or dispersed.
The point, of course, is that when the nation imagines Louisiana as a third world country, it becomes easier, even reasonable, to treat it as such: to occupy it with a military peacekeeping force; to hand out no-bid contracts to Halliburton to help with the rebuilding; to suspend laws regarding detention, wages, immigration, hiring practices; and so forth. “Ordinary people across Louisiana and the Gulf Coast are beginning to understand what it’s like to be Palestinians or Iraqis at the receiving end of Washington’s hypocritical promises and disastrous governmental and military actions,” authors Davis and Fontenot opine at the end of their story, having evidently caught the ranting fever during their visit to Evangeline Parish.7

Hence, while Katrina stories are still being told, and while there is no shortage of storytellers, there is the perception that the only audience that can comprehend such stories are those living in Louisiana or along the Gulf Coast. With everyone else, we are forced to speak in rants and hyperbole. And that, too, is often misunderstood. We are reminded of Flannery O’Connor’s oft-quoted remark: “When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal means of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures.”8 But, as O’Connor knew, shouting and drawing big pictures sometimes just makes people turn down their hearing aids and walk away.

And so the third problem we face, in addition to the problems of visibility and content, is one of means and media. When, where, and how can these stories be told most effectively? As Huyssen notes, “it is no longer possible . . . to think of the Holocaust or of any other historical trauma as a serious ethical and political issue apart from the multiple ways it is now linked to commodification and spectacularization in films, museums, docudramas, Internet sites, photography books, comics, fiction, even fairy tales . . . and pop songs.”9 What are our rhetorical and aesthetic options in this climate? What sorts of private and public testimony are possible now to oppose both the forgetting and the banalization of traumas or disasters?

A couple of things must be kept in mind. First, there are no prophylactic measures we can take to inoculate ourselves against the banality, commodification, and spectacle of today’s media culture, and there is no pure or safe space outside that environment we can go. Second, we must remember that even as the human suffering we find in events such as the Holocaust or Katrina has been endlessly commodified, such commodification does not inevitably produce banalized historical events. As Huyssen points out, “much depends . . . on the specific strategies of representation and commodification pursued and on the context in which they are staged.”10 We cannot solve these problems simply by opposing the “serious” story and the “trivial” or “entertaining” story, as some are wont to do tout court. Consequently, it is not a matter of opposing the rigorous, scholarly, and politically engaged treatment of Katrina, say, to the treatment of it one might get in the “disaster tours” of New Orleans that have been running for several years now, for this only reproduces that old high culture/low culture dichotomy of modernism in a new guise, and perpetuates the fantasy of “correct representation.”11
With these caveats in mind, we would offer three provocations regarding the possible forms of performative engagements:

*Interactivity vs. contiguity.* Much of the rhetoric in production design both in theatre/performance studies and in the computer/information technology that seems so important to public and political activism nowadays places a premium on “interactivity” as a goal or aim. While that may indeed be a worthy aim if we proceed from some wish or desire to create dialogue—or “true dialogue,” whatever that may be—we suggest that *contiguity* may be a more important factor than *interactivity* in thinking about the efficacy of stories and storytelling. Storytelling as embodied performance works in two different registers: through presentational media and representational media; it serves both a performant function and an informant or referential function; and it creates both presence effects and meaning effects.12 While western thought has tended to prioritize the latter over the former term in each of those binaries, we have to recognize that when we sacrifice the mess and bother of embodied contact and contiguity in space and time in the interests of efficient information or textual storage, retrieval, and transmission, we have effectively neutralized much of what storytelling has to offer. Here, we think, is one place in which performance offers comparative advantages to other commercial media and leisure and information industries because a performance seduces people to come together in material spaces and provides the means for them to do so relatively efficiently.13

*Selling stories vs. telling stories vs. performing stories.* George Gerbner has drawn our attention to how the media and information industries have reshaped our culture by producing stories to sell, rather than stories to tell.14 Here we want to suggest that insofar as we limit our mission as academics or engaged cultural workers to merely collecting stories, to adding them to the archive, we become part of the problem, not part of the solution. While there is, we suppose, a warm and fuzzy democratic impulse behind such initiatives—all stories are created equal, everyone has the right to have their story heard (or more specifically, recorded, transcribed, and stuck in the library or posted in some online archive)—it does not take much reflection to give the lie to that particular sentiment. Every storyteller assumes a burden of proof, and what the storyteller must prove is not just that they have a story to tell, but that they have a *tellable* story, a story that offers *counsel*. Not all stories assume or meet that burden. As Benjamin warned, thinking about how the novel has altered our relation to the storyteller even before the problem was exacerbated by the commercial media, we lose our capacity to distinguish between the tellable story and the story that is not worth telling—however well it might sell. Storytelling is both a power and a craft—*dynamis* and *techne*—and like the rhetoricians of old, a major part of our work, it seems to us, should always be pedagogical, directed toward helping others harness that power for themselves by striving simply to help them become better performers of tellable stories.

*Narrative vs. anti-narrative.* Finally, we add the notion of the “anti-narrative”—a tale that works against the forms, conventions, and standards of narrative that seem most familiar or comfortable to storytellers and audiences. We are suggesting here
not merely the lessons of the avant-garde or of Brecht’s “alienation” techniques, but a wider reflection on the purpose of all art in defamiliarizing the world around us, which often means interrupting our existing narrativizations of the world. Storytelling becomes valuable in this case, offers “counsel,” not so much because it has something important to “say,” but because it can change or redirect desire. And changing or redirecting desire can change the world. Desire is governed by narrative structures of power that propose a goal for our becoming, an image of an Other constructed in the interests of the powers that be. Working within the system, anti-narrative or avant-garde stories can introduce a degree of play or flexibility into the landscape of desire. The very marginality of the avant-garde or anti-narrative story, like that of the court jester, allows it to call into question the established order of things and to attempt to recruit the power of narrative in the interests of the storytellers. Such storytelling teaches us to think of art and rhetoric as an activity, a game, rather than as an “object” or “message.”

The quality of the story is a function of the quality of that activity, and thus, the engaged performer/storyteller is more of a catalyst for and a director of that activity* but a director in Anne Bogart’s sense, not a person who controls and determines that activity but a person who creates the conditions for something to happen.

Notes

[13] For this reason, it is no accident that post-Katrina New Orleans has become the center of a vibrant new community-based performance/theatre community. For a brief look at this

[14] This was a subject Gerbner lectured on widely toward the end of his life. See, for example, his The Electronic Storyteller: Television and the Cultivation of Values, VHS, dir. and prod. Sut Jhally, (Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation, 1997).

