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Writing to (Re)New Orleans: The Post-Hurricane Katrina Blogosphere and Its Ability to Inspire Recovery

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Writing to (Re)New Orleans:
The Post-Hurricane Katrina Blogosphere and Its Ability to Inspire Recovery

by

Daisy Pignetti

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Department of English
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ABSTRACT

Nearly every website or software application these days features a feed to subscribe to, a network to join, or a social timeline to track—all of which do their part to influence public opinion, promote products, and bring people closer together. Being a blogger since 2003 exposed me to these user-generated trends, but never did I expect my blog space, or any others, to play such an important role in my emotional well-being; not until Hurricane Katrina hit. Sharing my story as a transplanted New Orleanian watching the disaster unfold from afar in a public forum quickly linked me to other local voices, and soon I discovered a burgeoning “Big Easy” blogosphere.

This dissertation thus illustrates how online communications have the ability to evolve into cathartic and socially responsible exchanges during and after times of disaster. Relying on qualitative research methods, I first discuss existing kinds of texts (news reports, comments on news sites, print publications, oral histories, etc.) to offer a picture of how Hurricane Katrina appeared and was treated by various traditional media. I then shift focus to digital spaces, featuring

profiles of various New Orleans bloggers that I compiled through a series of interviews and analysis of their perpetual posting of blog entries, photos, videos, and status updates. I conclude their writing is a shared social experience with the Internet offering multiple platforms across which they can resist the debilitating effects of trauma **and** present their audiences with a deeper, truer understanding of what life is like in post-Katrina New Orleans.

Prologue: A Katrina Narrative

The crisis unfolded over several days, it was set in a specific locale, the details of which quickly became recognizable even to an observer without any previous knowledge of New Orleans. . . . But beyond the coverage of the major stations and papers, there is the experience of hundreds of thousands who have been affected. For millions more, following the story has been a very emotional experience. People sought conversations in their workplaces, often transcending the usual reserve between superiors and subordinates. They talked with friends and families, using the phone and the internet. The internet made accounts available by people who had escaped or been evacuated. These conversations have a material reality of their own.

Monika Krause, [“New Orleans: The Public Sphere of the Disaster.”](#) *Understanding Katrina.ssrc.org*

Introduction

As a New Orleans native enrolled at the University of South Florida attempting to complete graduate coursework, take doctoral exams within a year, and eventually write a dissertation on the affordances of weblogs to both writing programs and grassroots organizations, Hurricane Katrina changed everything. Not only did Americans witness the consequences of communication breakdown at the federal, state, and local government levels, displaced evacuees and transplants like myself were further abandoned by mediocre television coverage. Overblown flooding predictions, mispronounced street names, and rumors of widespread gang violence dominated the network news, when all we wanted was

to know about our friends, family, neighbors, and homes.

Written as a “self-narrative,”¹ the prologue that follows weaves in blog posts from August and September of 2005 to illustrate how I dealt with the breakdown of communication at that time of crisis. Knowing immediately that I would have to write about the impact this storm has had on my academic life, I also devote sections of this project to elaborating on how writing in online spaces since Hurricane Katrina has offered me and countless evacuees new ways to share knowledge (see Chapter 2) as well as describing the challenges I faced when determining which research methods would both allow for personal, evocative writing and capture the immediacy of the internet (see Chapter 3). Still, “self-stories often contain more than self” (Chang 33) and, given the data I have collected from fellow New Orleans bloggers (see Chapter 4), my aim is to demonstrate to my audience the extent to which “Studying others invariably invites readers to compare and contrast themselves with others in the cultural texts they read and study, in turn discovering new dimensions of their own lives” (Chang 33-34). Taken as a whole, this dissertation examines blogs created by locals to describe, document, and react to the chaotic aftermath of a national tragedy and, consequently, asserts the de-centered and diverse World Wide Web shapes “truth” in a collective, process-driven way that is potentially more effective than traditional media.

¹ Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner define self-narratives as “texts by complete-member researchers” who “explore groups of which they are already members or in which...they have become full members with complete identification and acceptance” (qtd. in Chang 33).

Blogging the Storm

["Katrina"](#)²

Sunday, August 28, 2005, 5:07 p.m.

I'm really scared about this hurricane. All my closest friends have called to talk of their evacuation plans, but I can't get in touch with my parents.

I spoke to them last night and no one answers at the house now, so at least I know they're on the road somewhere, but I wish I knew where! We have a place in Mississippi too but I doubt that's all together safe. I want them to drive to Tampa but I think they headed north. Hopefully the cellphone signals get better.

On a lighter note, here is a quote from the local New Orleans coverage:

"I'll be here tomorrow, I'm not leaving," said trombonist Eddie "Doc" Lewis. "I've been through typhoons, monsoons, tornadoes, hurricanes and every other phoon, soon or storm. I'm not worried."

Like the musician quoted above, making light of things is what I did.

Never having faced something so emotionally wrenching such as the death of someone close to me, I had always been able to protect myself from loss, trauma, and pain.

² All blog posts quoted appear as they did on the screen at <http://dpignett.blog.usf.edu>. I have occasionally corrected obvious typos and clarified abbreviated names, but typeface and paragraph breaks remain the same. Due to a recent Word Press upgrade to the Blog@USF site, all posts have been exported to my personal website, <http://www.daisypignetti.com/>.

Not this time.

When Hurricane Katrina made landfall at 6:10 a.m. CDT on August 29, 2005, it was a Category 3 hurricane with sustained winds of 125 mph, and I was stuck in Tampa traffic. I was on my way to the St. Petersburg offices of First Advantage Investigative Services, where I would sit all day editing surveillance reports in a cubicle. “Facts First” was our slogan and we exposed healthy people who had enough strength to move sofas but who were collecting Workman’s Compensation insurance. Not really my style, but I had taken this “real” job as a step into the so-called “real” world in a half-hearted attempt to break away from academia. Turns out, I would grow to hate the corporate pressure to meet quotas and general “quantity over quality” attitude.

It didn’t help that my already budding resentment for the job would be ignited by the lack of access to outside information about the storm and my city. Despite the aforementioned corporate slogan, having that job that week put me in the position of “No facts at all.” I never had the chance to surf the Internet or make personal phone calls on First Advantage’s landline because we were bogged down with an editing list of more than two hundred cases, which only kept growing. Cell phone use was out of the question because everyone I knew had a New Orleans 504 area code phone number, including me, and with the towers down there was no getting beyond the “all circuits busy” message.

[“Hurricane Update”](#)

Monday, August 29, 2005, 12:55 p.m.

I'm at work but in a daze. Can't get through to anyone, for obvious reasons, but hoping that the storm's worst has passed my city.

Thanks to all who have left comments. I'm a mess. I was supposed to be going home for Labor Day weekend and my 30th birthday, but it looks like I'll be staying in FL instead. Everyone's concern and support has been wonderful, I can't tell you how much I need it. I have no idea what my parents will return to but I know it can't be as bad as some of the other historic areas and the 9th ward where I went to high school.

Actually, it would be worse, with every house on our street destroyed by water, flooded by a deluge of ten feet of water or more. Our refrigerator would be found in the dining room upside down, and all of our furniture would be so saturated with water that it crumbled at the slightest touch.³

But I wouldn't know that for months.

That fateful Monday when Hurricane Katrina made landfall, I was stuck at work imagining the wind and rain blowing into New Orleans. All I could do was look out the window at the sunny St. Petersburg sky and then turn to the case list on my computer screen. Thankfully, my co-workers were sensitive to my being from New Orleans. Even with the four major hurricanes that hit Florida the year before, we all knew this one was a serious threat. Marcia, who shared one of three cubicle walls with me, asked if I wanted to listen to her radio. I declined,

³ Photos taken of the inside of the house, where the water damage is most visible, are available at <http://noladaisy.shutterfly.com/249>.

wanting to focus on the work at hand and not listen to looped coverage or reporters mispronouncing neighborhood names or speculating about the amount of damage. Only by the end of the day, when I knew the storm had passed could I breathe a sigh of relief. I got in my car and drove to the University of South Florida Tampa campus for my first graduate seminar of the Fall semester. Once there, I ran into a former professor, Rita Ciresi. Since I had written about New Orleans-related topics for the Nonfiction Writing course she taught the semester prior, she knew how proud I was to call that place home.

“I’m **so** sorry,” she said with a serious and concerned face.

“Oh, it’s OK. It’s passed now. Everyone’s fine,” I replied, not understanding why she was speaking in such a hushed tone. I assumed she had heard the overblown media reports and seen the pictures of areas that were heavily flooded, but that I knew from experience were places that **always** flooded whenever it rained a couple inches, never mind a hurricane. Although I still don’t know if she knew then what I found out the next morning, I’ll never forget brushing her off like that. It makes me feel like I couldn’t have cared less about what people were going through in the Superdome or in even worse places, like stuck in their attics.

That guilt still persists, despite the fact that I certainly did care about those stranded in the city **and** I couldn’t even confirm whether or not my own parents were “fine.”

[“Still no word”](#)

Tuesday, August 30, 2005, 12:10 a.m.

Due to the cell phone signals being out of whack, I've yet to hear from my parents since yesterday when they were in Laurel, MS. :(I did just get an email from a friend who made it up to Shreveport, LA, and I spoke to other friends in Baton Rouge this afternoon. No one has power and the government officials are telling people not to return to NOLA for at least a week. Word is power might not be back to everyone for up to 2 months?!?

Honestly, I've avoided watching the news coverage for much of today and can only predict that when I do start hearing from friends that the details of the damage will be horrifying. . . .

Denying the Flood

NBC's *Today Show*

Tuesday, August 30, 2005, 7:05 a.m.

Brian Williams: "There has been a huge development overnight ... the historic French Quarter, dry last night and it is now filling with water. This is water from nearby Lake Pontchartrain; the levees failed overnight." (["Media provide forums for administration officials and conservatives to spread falsehoods about hurricane relief efforts"](#))

When I heard these words that Tuesday morning, I paused from getting ready for work and looked at the television screen. I stared at the news anchor standing in a few inches of water but had no idea what the levees breaking even

meant, other than flooding. But how much water? And which levee? New Orleans is surrounded by waterways.⁴ Not wanting to be late for the job I dreaded or even consider what a flooded New Orleans looked like, I turned off the television and drove to St. Petersburg.

Each morning of that “hurricane week,” which transformed the situation in New Orleans from a natural disaster to a national, man-made catastrophe, I maintained my routine. I went to work during the day and to my graduate seminars at night. It was the first week of class so I couldn’t skip, although professors understood when I did not complete the reading assignments the next week. While I did not expect to be treated any differently from other students, I was frustrated when what was going on in Louisiana and Mississippi was replaced with discussions of classical rhetoric in one course and the virtual world Second Life in another. Yes, the school year needed to begin and the world needed to move on, but topics like those were so removed from my reality. How could anyone even contribute to an abstract academic conversation when my city was drowning, looters had taken to the streets, and I **still** hadn’t spoken to my parents or heard from all of my friends?

[“Up on a rooftop...”](#)

Wednesday, August 31, 2005, 12:07 p.m.

⁴ As defined on the [Gateway New Orleans](#) website, “Most of the city is situated on the east bank, between the [Mississippi R]iver and Lake Pontchartrain to the north. Because it was built on a great turn of the river, it is known as the Crescent City.” Regarding its topography, “Elevations range from 3.65 m (12 ft) above sea level to 2 m (6.5 ft) below; as a result, an ingenious system of water pumps, drainage canals, and levees has been built to protect the city from flooding.”

Got a surprise call this morning from my friend Rudy who was the only of my friends to stay in NOLA. He was on the roof of the American Can Company apartment building where he lives. He was only up there so he could get better cell phone reception. I couldn't believe he got through to my phone! He said that he and his parents are fine and they have enough water and food for 4 days. He could see all the water surrounding the Mid-City area and some minor fires, but he actually sounded in good spirits. They're listening to the radio for reports and he knew more than I did! I called his friend Kristi to let her know and so she could call his sisters [in Texas].

I just can't fathom all of this yet. If you have ever met me, you know within an hour's conversation that I am a New Orleans girl and how much I love that city. To see it slipping away hurts so badly. I was to go there this weekend to celebrate my 30th birthday and to see friends I hadn't seen in months, even years. Now who knows when I will get to see them? My [then boyfriend, now husband] AC will never get to see the NOLA I knew, and I had such plans for us to go to tons of places that I'm sure are now submerged in water and totally destroyed.

I'm trying again to distract myself with work, but to hear of the looting makes me so angry that I want to spit, kick and scratch. This scares me the most: "*The New Orleans Times-Picayune reports*

today that a Wal-Mart in the Lower Garden District was looted, and the entire gun collection was taken.”

“Getting by” at the office was easier than at school. I could open up a case to edit and stare at it. When I lost focus, no one would know. Though I don’t think many coworkers knew what to say to me, I did appreciate my boss popping up from her cubicle every morning to ask, “Any news on your parents yet?” Each day I calmly answered, “No, not yet,” and tried to look as if I was without worry.

[“I just don’t know”](#)

Thursday, September 1, 2005, 12:54 a.m.

I keep waiting for my breakdown to happen. Having heard from Rudy today and Tom G just now got me through today and even through my first night of classes at USF. Had dinner with AC after and we’re trying to stay optimistic about this weekend but the more days that go by without hearing from my parents, the more I get upset. I don’t even know where to look for information about Laurel, MS...

The more I hear about the crime and looting and carjacking, the more my heart sinks. What the hell are these people thinking? Where do they think they are going to go? I haven’t felt so empty since 9/11, but this time it’s my home. While I live in FL now, the only time I consider being away from home was my 2 years in Boston. Ever since I’ve been in Tampa, I’ve been close enough to

home that I didn't consider myself living somewhere else. Every day this summer I would talk to Rudy, Tom, and Jeremy, among others. I scroll through my cell phone now and nearly every number is either a person who lives in NOLA or who used to live there and still has family there.

I have not slept well but have not been tired during the days either. Just distracted.

It's gonna hit me soon and it's not going to be pretty.

I finally broke down in the company bathroom that Thursday afternoon. I couldn't take the busy signals or the "All circuits busy" message I kept getting whenever I called someone from home. I sat with my boss in her office and cried. "I just want to go home," I whimpered. "But I can't. And when I finally do, nothing will be the same...it's all gone." Not knowing how to react, she let me leave work early, and I didn't return until the following Wednesday.

I can't remember a thing about that night, other than sitting on my boyfriend Andy's couch in silence. He knew I was upset, but I had no way to explain to him the loss I felt. As close as we were, at times I felt I had to go through this disaster alone. I didn't know how else to handle it. My grief was compounded by the inability to speak with my friends—people I wouldn't have to explain anything to—since phone signals were still fickle. I was also beginning to resent the idea that people who had never been to New Orleans would now judge it solely from the images of looters broadcast on television and then dare

ask⁵, “How the hell could you love that place?” and “Why on earth should the government give money to rebuild it?”

Finding Friends and Family

Eventually I was able to speak with more friends as they left their temporary evacuation locations to stay with family in other parts of the country. Mayor Nagin and the National Guard weren't letting anyone back into the city, so they wouldn't be able to assess the damage for some time. Though I had no idea what their job situations might be in the future, I was relieved that they could escape for a little while. Still, I didn't like it when they speculated the worst for my neighborhood. A phone conversation with my friend Tom provides a perfect example of what I mean. I had been so worried about him because he owns several properties in a not-so-great, that is, sure to be looted uptown neighborhood, but when we spoke all he could say was, “Daisy, I am so sorry. Your parents' house must have gotten a lot of water.”

⁵ And they did dare ask: Only one day after the storm hit journalism professor and blogger Jeff Jarvis asked, [“Should New Orleans be rebuilt?”](#) A week later *The Washington Post* published [“Time for a Tough Question: Why Rebuild?”](#) and *Slate* posted the essay, [“Don't Refloat: The case against rebuilding the sunken city of New Orleans.”](#) House Speaker Dennis Hastert also vehemently spoke out against federal assistance for the city and its people, as did the *Republican-American* in an August 2005 editorial, “Is New Orleans Worth Reclaiming.” Naturally, these writings elicited both support and outrage. Yet these opinions further support the purpose of my dissertation project, illustrating the myriad ways local New Orleanians use the Internet to respond to the critics and share their reasons why their city matters, no matter how difficult the rebuilding process.

“What do you mean?” I asked. “All the reports I’ve read only mention the lower 9th ward and the breach of the 17th Street Canal. UNO [the University of New Orleans] is three blocks away from my house but only Loyola and Tulane have declared that they’re closing for the rest of the semester due to damage.

If no one is mentioning my neighborhood, then maybe no water came through there. Aren’t you worried about *your* neighborhood?”

“Daisy, I really don’t know,” he replied, probably too tired and scared to think about the real answers to any of my questions.

When I spoke to Tom again a few days later, I heard more of the same negativity, this time regarding the fact that I still had not gotten in touch with my parents.

“I don’t know, Daisy. That seems like an awful long time without any communication.”

“Tom, don’t tell me that. Now I’ve got images of them stranded on the side of a road somewhere.” While I wanted to hold on to the assumption that they had made their way to our smaller home in Mississippi, I could not be sure.

Since I was not going back to work until after Labor Day, I made my way to USF’s campus the Friday of that “hurricane week.” I wanted to talk only to people who were more optimistic, even if that was not the reality. I decided to visit the Writing Center where some fellow graduate students worked, and once there, I sat down and logged into my email out of habit. When I clicked on my

Inbox folder, I found what I'd been longing to hear via telephone call, and never expected⁶ to on the computer screen:

Date: September 2, 2005, 5:30 p.m.

Subject: GOOD NEWS

Hi Sis: Our parents have been found!!! Hooray!!! Just a bit shaken up.

They left the hotel [in Laurel, MS] on Tuesday and made to the house in Picayune, MS. The house made it with just a few broken dishes. They stayed there 'til today and called Raquel using the neighbor's phone. They just got their power restored.⁷

They are heading to Tampa as we speak to stay with you. So you better get the place ready. They will probably call us and update us with their whereabouts when they stop to rest. I will keep you updated of course. I don't think they are fully aware of the damage NOLA sustained. I just hope they take it lightly.

Upon reading this email from my brother, I immediately called his house in California. His wife, Raquel, answered and told me she had spoken to my parents and that, yes, they intended to drive to Tampa, but were having difficulty filling the car's gas tank. Nearby gas stations were either empty or lines were long everywhere else. I took this to mean that it wasn't likely they would be

⁶ Suffice it to say my brother and I do not communicate often; I believe this was the first email exchange, most likely because no one could reach me on my 504-area code cell phone.

⁷ This was actually a false report. My brother misinterpreted the neighbors having a generator to charge their satellite telephone with having power.

arriving in Tampa anytime soon. All the same, I passed along Andy's 813-area code phone number so everyone could more easily get in touch with me.

Now that I knew where my parents were, after that conversation, I no longer felt the need to make any more desperate phone calls or hit redial. I was so relieved, and that Friday night for the first time that long, torturous week, I slept soundly.

Chapter One: The Emergence of Citizen Media

Mainstream media accounts of events become the semi-official narratives that eventually emerge as “standard” history, a process that overwhelms minority voices as the event is articulated and retold.

Aaron Parrett, qtd. in Carolyn Kitch and Janice Hume, *Journalism in a Culture of Grief* 4

The primary function of these blogs and videos is not to be a factual report or confirmation of what is happening. They are highly subjective, emotional reports on events that we already know are happening...but we still wanted to read or see them from people actually experiencing the events.

Jill Walker, *Blogging* 94

Introduction

The decision to open this dissertation with a personal narrative was intended to highlight how Internet access and online writing during times of crisis can create powerful authorial situations for ordinary citizens. The blog posts shared emphasize how that space allowed me to convey the trauma of watching the event unfold from afar. Ending the prologue where I did, however, may say more about the actual focus of this project. That is, knowing my parents were on their way to stay with me was only the beginning of my Katrina-specific blogging.

With the growing familiarity of the blog genre, much has been published about the use of technology for grassroots and community endeavors, but there

is still qualitative research to be done, particularly of placeblogs⁸ that coincide with sites of natural and/or national disaster. Unlike other scholarly Internet inquiries where issues of identity might influence the structures and processes of the research, the population discussed here stands out in its transparent use of blogs and other Web 2.0 technologies. Even if they remain anonymous or go by a nom de plume (or nom de blog), these New Orleans bloggers' writing differs from those who go online to fabricate an identity and, as such, it elicits different results. While their individual blog audiences may be small, "going public with [their] thoughts and experiences can be a self-affirming process" (Suler qtd. in Grossman), and disclosing details about their post-Katrina experience allows these bloggers to connect and dialogue with one another. Chapter Two will highlight more facets of the blog genre, but, in brief, whether they write for their own healing purposes or to provide a public service, the fact that so many New Orleanians are composing and openly sharing their personal stories is significant.

What this dissertation provides then is an extended look at the range of writing done by local bloggers who all passionately defend what makes New Orleans so unique and worth saving. Including their testimonials makes this a more personal and emotional project; however, I strongly believe doing so is the most effective way to illustrate how Hurricane Katrina made these locals hyperaware of their basic human need to give and receive information. Even if

⁸ When *Placeblogger.com* launched in 2007, it defined placeblogs as "an act of sustained attention to a particular place over time." These sites are also described as "hyperlocal" because "When news happens in a community, placeblogs often cover those events in unique and nontraditional ways..." (Bollier).

they did not create their blog with the intent of correcting the misinformation being promulgated by the national media, these citizens use their public writing spaces to expose the wreckage Katrina and the levee breaches left behind and to recall the memories of what their lives were like before August 29, 2005. And while their posts may be similar at times, relying on the “same kinds of metaphor and cultural-historical context” (Kitch and Hume 3), they also resist this sameness when they share details that distinguish their recovery experiences from one another. Before focusing on Hurricane Katrina, however, it is important we understand the term, *networked citizen*, and then take a look at the emergence and use of new and alternative media in the wake of September 11th.

A Networked Self

Paying attention to the Americans using technology to construct their identity, to create community, to heal, and to communicate is central to this dissertation project; hence, it relies on interdisciplinary foundations. To begin, I find support from various trends in sociology and technology. In her seminal work *Life on the Screen* Sherry Turkle writes, “It is on the Internet that our confrontations with technology as it collides with our sense of human identity are fresh, even raw. In the real-time communities of cyber space, we are dwellers on the threshold between the real and virtual, unsure of our footing, inventing ourselves as we go along” (10). While she relies upon the Multi-User Domain [MUD] example for her extensive look at identity online, I apply her work to support my argument that during and after disasters, locals and other personally

invested citizens can use blogs to offer audiences unique takes on what the experience has done to their lives.

In fact, and as my opening narrative illustrated, the exigency with which these Americans write and rely on such web spaces can also offer them relief. Rather than passively sitting in front of a television screen, when people decide to interact with a computer and use Web 2.0 software applications, they are in control of that embodied experience, can reach an audience, and potentially receive feedback within minutes of sharing, which is fundamental during times of crisis. Such embodied actions are also a signature trait of this millennium's "networked self," a self "constantly making and breaking connections, declaring allegiances and interests and then renouncing them—participating in a video conference while sorting through email or word processing at the same time" (Bolter and Grusin 232). This habit for multi-tasking and "push-button publishing" has evolved into something many describe as democratic and necessary, putting many Americans in the more trusting position of not only allowing our lives to rely upon technology in the ways we do but also believing that once we do share something online we can raise awareness and make a difference.

Author of the book *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*, Clay Shirky addresses this new, social side to technology, believing, "We are living in the middle of a remarkable increase in our ability to share, to cooperate with one another, and to take collective action, all outside the framework of traditional institutions and organizations" (20-21). As the quantitative data from the Pew Internet and American Life project discussed

later in this chapter and the forthcoming qualitative examinations of both my and other New Orleans bloggers' experiences will illustrate, real world events such as September 11th and Hurricane Katrina push us even further to move beyond the established channels.

The Shock of September 11th

On September 11, 2001, the need for information was at an all-time high; the nation was in frenzy, having witnessed four hijacked aircraft attack major cities all along the Eastern seaboard. Prior to and even in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, however, things were not as mutually accessed or exchanged via online media as they are now. According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project report, "The Commons of the Tragedy," people primarily depended on their television for news and their telephones to communicate with family members during the days and weeks after. Other research points to public and talk radio as the choice forums individuals turned to for immediate voice-to-voice communication during this time of crisis. (Cohen, Willis 2004). Still, it was not always easy to rely on these media channels. Essays in the edited collection *Journalism After September 11* remind readers how, due to their proximity to New York City and the World Trade Center itself, many radio, television, and telephone transmitter towers experienced difficulties. Further data collected by Pew assert, "43% of [Internet users] said they had problems getting to the sites **they wanted to access**. Of those who had trouble, 41% kept trying to get to the same site until they finally reached it; 38% went to other sites, 19% gave up their

research” (Rainie, emphasis mine). The location of servers and media outlets and the volume of people trying to gain access are apparent reasons for this trouble, but we should also consider the fact that the websites many Americans initially visited or “wanted” were those of the high-traffic major news networks.

Although web user frustration abounded, Pew reports have also indicated news **could** be found on the Internet, “it was just a matter of knowing where to look” (Kahney, qtd. in Allan 124). Informative and reverent commentary was happening in unexpected places (for instance, in emails and discussion boards), which led Web and social media scholar David Weinberger to reason eloquently: “For the first time, the nation and the world could talk with itself, doing what humans do when the innocent suffer: cry, comfort, inform, and, most important, tell the story together” (qtd. in Rainie and Kalsnes). Moreover, not only did ordinary citizens turn to new media outlets to gain “a greater sense of connection to the crisis” (Allan 128), so did journalists. As a *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* reporter admits, “It’s as though if I comb through enough Web pages, sift through the right chat rooms, click on the right e-mail, I might somehow find some semblance of an answer to this ugly mess” (Benedetti qtd. in Allan 130). Remarks like these capture two essential shifts in the media culture: 1) the event of 9/11 was jarring not only for victims and Americans tuning in, but for the press too and 2) the Internet was becoming a place for gaining mastery over fear and grief.

Echoing the latter point about the Internet is the data published in a subsequent Pew report, [“One year later: September 11 and the Internet.”](#) Here

Weinberger's point about seeking comfort and telling the story together is exemplified further by the following list of types of emotional postings and their corresponding percentages:

- Expressions of sadness, grief and condolences, which appeared on 75% of the Web sites that allowed Internet users to post comments
- Expressions of religious and spiritual thoughts, which appeared on 61% of such sites
- Expressions of anger, fear, and hate, which appeared on 52% of such sites
- Expressions of shock and disbelief, which appeared on 48% of such sites
- Expressions of patriotism, which appeared on 46% of such sites

(Fox, Rainie, and Madden)

With these numbers on hand, it is easy to understand why many proponents of citizen journalism, including those who also practice traditional journalism, refer to 9/11 as a breakthrough moment for the Internet. To quote NYU Journalism professor Jay Rosen's initial reaction after the terrorist attacks, "When the observer-hood becomes unthinkable, new things can be thought. It is reasonable to hope that September 11 eventually improves the mind of American journalism. If it does, it will be an instance of creative destruction" (28).

In the years since September 11, the Pew Internet and American Life Project has gone on to publish additional reports, many of which support Rosen's prediction that we have forever changed as consumers of media and interpreters

of events, with more and more of us considering the Internet a vital database of information. Tracking the sites visited and the connection speed of users' personal computers, Pew published ["How the Internet has Woven Itself into American Life"](#) in January of 2005. Focusing on how broadband connectivity increases the use of the Internet, this report suggests "More things will become connected to the Internet...And more meaning will be extracted from the information online as search engines get better and as connections between related bits of data grow" (Rainie and Horrigan 69). With these abilities noted for Internet users in early 2005, it is no surprise many Americans instinctively turned to the Internet to facilitate disaster relief when Hurricane Katrina hit on August 29th of that year.

The Disaster of Hurricane Katrina

As with any emergency, resources were strained: "In the days after Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast region and knocked out cell phone towers and landline telephone service, citizens, local community organizations, government agencies and news outlets turned to the internet as a communication lifeline during the crisis" (Madden). Pew researchers Stephen Morris and John Horrigan conducted a survey regarding the two major hurricanes of 2005 entitled "Getting news about Katrina and Rita" and found in addition to the websites of major news organizations that those in need of information also referred to blogs and other alternative media sites. Even with these not being overwhelming numbers, 17% and 11% respectively, this behavior implies our

collective searching, navigating, and analyzing abilities⁹ have considerably improved since September 11th, including the means with which to assess information from such sites as valid or otherwise.

Something **not** addressed in that data, however, is whether or not any of the Americans surveyed included people actually impacted or displaced by the storm. We may well never know, but it is an important point to mention before going further in this assessment of what people do online in addition to how they make use of what they find there, particularly during times of crisis. We also need to consider how Hurricane Katrina differed from any other storm journalists had covered before both in the form of unprecedented emotion and unrelenting questions.

Media that Matters

When the levees broke and the looting began in New Orleans, even hardened reporters expressed fear and disbelief at what they were witnessing, and circumstances surrounding the news, or lack thereof, spun wildly out of control. Many journalists had no choice but to put themselves at great risk, alter their methods of delivery, clash with those in authority, and/or admit they did not have the answers. A particularly noteworthy example of this behavior occurred on September 2, 2005, in an extended report on Fox News' *Hannity and Colmes*.

⁹ Other indicators of both technological abilities and reliance on the Internet are verified in subsequent Pew Internet and American Life Project reports, with the percentage of Americans having adopted broadband high-speed access at home in 2006 being 42% then increasing to 63% in 2009.

Both Geraldo Rivera and Shepard Smith broke out of their experienced news anchor personas and showed how disturbed they were by the images of death and chaos that ensued all around them, not to mention how rattled they were by the lack of information. Moreover, they refused to let their studio talking head, Sean Hannity, diminish the frustrating experiences they were seeing first hand. The political website *Crooks and Liars* offers archived [video](#) of the exchange as well as the following commentary in a post appropriately entitled "[Horror Show](#)":

September 2, 2005

Shepard Smith and Geraldo Rivera were livid about the situation in NOLA as they appeared on H&C. When Hannity tried his usual spin job and said "let's get this in perspective," Smith chopped him off at the knees and started yelling at him saying, "This is perspective!" It was shocking.

Geraldo who I'm no fan of was crying, holding a little child up to demonstrate the extremely inhumane conditions these people are forced to live under. Forced is the right word because they are locked in the dome by our government and can't leave. Troops are guarding the bridge.

This goes beyond political lines and it's as sad a situation as I've seen. Let's see all the happy politicians slap themselves on their backs after viewing this segment. (Amato)

This blog post links to other bloggers' opinions¹⁰ of the FOX News coverage, reinforcing Sean Hannity's and also Bill O'Reilly's "behind the desk" naiveté about the conditions:

["Not A National Disaster"](#)

digby September 2, 2005, 5:42 p.m.

Bill O'Reilly is trying with all his might to make this story about "thugs" and bad Democrats but both Fox news reporters on the ground are having none of it. Shepard Smith and Steve Harrigan are both insisting that the story is about people dying and starving on the streets of New Orleans. Smith is particularly upset that the mayor sent buses to the Hyatt today and took tourists over to the Superdome and let them off at the front of the line.

O'Reilly says "you sound so bitter" and said they need a strong leader like Rudy Giuliani. Smith replies that what they needed "on the first day was food and water and what they needed on the second day was food and water and what they needed on the third day was food and water."

This next example echoes the one above, but its author, Jeralyn, also goes further to plead for the truth from the media:

["News Heroes"](#)

Talk Left, September 2, 2005, 9:12 p.m.

¹⁰ As with the blog posts I shared in the Prologue, these all appear as they do on the screen.

I've never seen anything as harrowing as Fox News' Geraldo Rivera and Shepard Smith on Hannity and Colmes. While Aaron Brown on CNN said we have "turned the corner", it's clearly not the truth. There are thousands of people trapped in what Geraldo called "this Hell on earth" at the convention center. No one has been bused out. Shepard was on I-10 and just devastating in his description of the "hundreds and hundreds and hundreds" of people being denied exit and still without food, water, medicine or water. When a network like Fox can't prevent its reporters from speaking the truth, you have to know the situation is so much worse than we've been told. Geraldo was crying, Shep Smith looked like he wanted to drive a knife through Sean Hannity and Alan Colmes. How frustrating for them to watch reality get trumped by spinned photos of supply-laden ships arriving. The reality is that 12 hours after those ships arrived, nothing has changed for those in lock-down at the convention center or exiled on a highway. Geraldo, Shep Smith and CNN's Anderson Cooper are heroes. Tell their networks. We need unfiltered news. We need the truth. And they are telling it.

Calling these particular journalists "heroes" indicates that the author believes he can only trust those who speak out, interrupt, and show their dissatisfaction with the circumstances. According to Communications scholar and Louisiana native Frank Durham, broadcasts such as these are distinguishable from those

surrounding the tragedy of September 11th because they illustrate a “re-ordered relationship between journalism and the government” (98). He explains further:

In major national crises prior to Katrina, the norm has been for the press to unify with the government—and for the government to reciprocate. In this reflexive routine, the national media has traditionally shown an unwillingness to criticize the president or federal government, or to engage in any other normal oppositions. As a matter of “consensus” in these cases, America has become “one” and the press has covered it with a nationalistic eye.

(Durham 98-99)

In the case of Hurricane Katrina, however, “the trope of national symbolism could not frame this story” (Durham 105). And how could it?

With studio talking heads clashing with their “man on the street” reporters and others pointing fingers at FEMA and Homeland Security officials, journalism once again was turned on its head. Some reporters blatantly began to “take a critical look at [President] Bush’s leadership from the day of 9/11 through the botched hurricane relief effort” (Finnegan 147); others did not take the time to verify some of the information they received, causing a high volume of salacious and “error-ridden reporting” (Finnegan 148).

With the focus during that final week of August 2005 switching from flooding to looting to the National Guard arriving with supplies four days after the storm hit, many reporters did not think to address many other facets of the storm story, those beyond the Superdome and Convention Center. They could offer

worldwide viewers broad assessments of what they saw, but they could not offer those locals who had evacuated and were watching from hotel rooms or the homes of extended family members any specific information relevant to their neighborhoods. According to the authors of "Finding and Framing Katrina," "New Orleans was presented as a disorganized city on the brink of collapse... [with] certain programmatic themes emerg[ing] in the television coverage...finding damage, finding death, finding help, finding authority, and finding the bad guys" (Dynes and Rodriguez 25). The editors of *The New Atlantis* also found "while the emotions are genuine, the media's unremitting feeding on those emotions is profoundly unhealthy for the body politic...distort[ing] truth and distract[ing] from what really matters" (117).

Even with these shortcomings exposed, eventually the news cycle continued on its course. Gradually moving on to other stories, Lisa Finnegan writes, "By the end of October, stories about the Katrina refugees disappeared from news reports and public anger dissolved" (150). Since then, a number of embedded journalists and documentary filmmakers have attempted to capture the devastation of Katrina as well as the slow recovery process; however, it has become increasingly evident that it is online¹¹ where audiences could obtain a more accurate picture of what is happening.

¹¹ The *History Channel* recently dedicated an entire program to the blogs written by the military stationed overseas. Entitled "[Band of Bloggers](#)," it "reviews the most insightful and popular blogs kept by soldiers deployed in Iraq, then tracks down the actual soldiers to join them in reflection on their experiences and the impact of their blogs."

Letting Locals Have Their Say

Indeed, many have declared the Internet “performed admirably during the disaster” (“The Lessons of Katrina” 117). Whether just visiting sites hosted by major news networks or otherwise, leaving comments or creating blog spaces of their own, the validity of this medium for communication and information increased as a result of Hurricane Katrina. Once again, the editors of *The New Atlantis* extolled these efforts, stating:

While bloggers don’t have the platform available to broadcast media, they did provide useful information before, during, and after the crisis—although much of it was, of course, unavailable to the people left powerless by the storm.... And while the false reports from the major media were frequently repeated online, it is worth noting that the blogosphere’s native skepticism has meant that much of the impetus for checking facts and correcting the record has come from bloggers (117).

Of course, the possibility for inaccuracy exists in online spaces just as the television news wavered in the examples above; however, as David Weinberger reasons in his book *Small Pieces Loosely Joined: A Unified Theory of the Web*, the Internet “gets its value not from the smoothness of its overall operation but from its abundance of small nuggets that point to more small nuggets” (x).

Consider the abundance of information shared in the three examples below, all from the group blog, *Metroblogging New Orleans*¹², which itself is part of a larger collective based on the premise of offering city-specific information. Literally as soon as the storm passed, the site included many posts like the select three below that countered (and cursed) the mainstream media reports:

[“Flooding Predictions Overblown”](#)

August 31, 2005, 9:58 a.m.

Fox News is saying the entire city will be covered in 15 feet of water. That is simply bullshit. Close to the lake that will be the case, but not anywhere else. If you're uptown, downtown, bywater, warehouse district.. don't write off your possessions just yet. It's still going to suck, bad, but don't listen to the sensationalist reports of 12 feet of water over the entire city.

[“French Quarter Update”](#)

August 31, 2005, 3:02 p.m.

Earlier this afternoon I called CDs Saloon, prompted by a post on NOLA.com's Vieux Carre forum that indicated that people were there. It was confirmed that all the news sources that said

¹² As the creators of *Metroblogging.com* candidly share in their [“About”](#) section: “We got sick of reading local news that was syndicated from the other side of the country, or was just repurposed national chit chat that had nothing to do with our city.”

yesterday that the quarter had 6 to 8 feet of flooding were purely false.

Yesterday I saw a CNN video report online that indicated that the reporter was standing in the quarter - on common street - while the water was rising. Usually it's the tourists that ask where the quarter is while they're standing in it. So much for responsible journalism. It's like telling me that my house just collapsed...and then saying "Oh, sorry. Wrong neighborhood." Jerk.

The only street that is flooded is Conti because of some kind of water valve breakage coming for the Wax Museum.

I didn't hear about the degree of flooding.

["Outlying areas..."](#)

September 1, 2005, 1:08 p.m.

With the focus on Downtown I know some people in more outlying areas may not be getting good first-hand information. Please post any information you have about the outlying areas as comments.

I've been specifically asked to enquire about Chalmette, Violet, Meraux and Gentilly but certainly we don't need to limit it to that.

This would also be a good place to inquire about specific areas that may be getting eclipsed by the focus on downtown.

In addition to revealing and requesting valuable information for people evacuated from or just familiar with the city, these posts illustrate the pace with which locals

directly impacted and/or familiar with the area used the Internet to respond to the disaster. They also reiterate that while getting news faster has become commonplace, if we seek news and cannot find facts applicable to our situations we at least can leave comments and hope for an answer. For instance, the third example requesting information about various neighborhoods around the greater New Orleans area received over fifty comments, the majority of which were posted within 24 hours.

These examples also build upon the growing reliance on the Internet as a space of “empathy, responsibility, and fairness” (Lakoff and Haplin), resisting the probability for the “story” of hurricane victims to become just that, a story for the mainstream media and/or politicians to exploit. For one final example, one that brings this chapter’s material about the rise of citizen journalism full circle by exemplifying both what became the meta-narrative of the storm and the ability for local voices to rise during this time of crisis, I offer the excerpt below, written by New Orleans journalist Chris Rose. Published on NOLA.com¹³ days after the storm and now included in Rose’s book *1 Dead in Attic: After Katrina*¹⁴, it offers a first-hand account of everyday life in a devastated and nearly desolate city:

“Hope”

¹³ During Hurricane Katrina the NOLA.com website, which is a counterpart to the local newspaper *The Times-Picayune*, “actually became the paper...because the newspaper’s readership was in diaspora, spread around the country in shelters and homes of families and friends” (Glaser). The site also made history, winning the Breaking News and Public Service Pulitzer Prizes in 2006, the first year the Pulitzer Committee opened all its categories to online entries.

¹⁴ Rose, in addition to being part of the team that won the Public Service Pulitzer Prize, was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Distinguished Commentary in 2006.

September 11, 2005

It's a strange place. Then again, anywhere that more than ten news reporters gather becomes a strange place by default.

I saw Anderson Cooper interviewing Dr. Phil. And while Cooper's CNN camera crew filmed Dr. Phil, Dr. Phil's camera crew filmed Cooper, and about five or six other camera crews from other shows and networks stood to the side and filmed all of that.

By reporting this scene, I have become the media covering the media covering the media.

It all has the surrealistic air of a Big Event, what with Koppel and Geraldo and all those guys wandering around in their Eddie Bauer hunting vests, and impossibly tall and thin anchorwomen from around the region powdering their faces and teasing their hair so they look good when they file their latest report from Hell.

"And today in New Orleans...blah blah blah."

Today in New Orleans, a traffic light worked. Someone watered flowers. And anyone with the means to get online could have heard Dr. John's voice wafting in the dry wind, a sound of grace, comfort, and familiarity here in the saddest, loneliest place in the world.

It's a start. (Rose 20-21).

Reporting these scenes in his final paragraph, and exposing how life after Hurricane Katrina made those scenes extraordinary, Rose wrote what only a

local could capture. Anyone who wanted a visual picture of what the city looked like days after the chaos rather than the “blah blah blah” of the cable news anchors now had one. Scattered all over the United States, New Orleanians like myself, in fact, were **desperate** for such reports. We began turning off our televisions and going online to read and ask about our homes, our streets, our neighborhoods, many of which were never mentioned in the looped television coverage.

Without a doubt New Orleans has become an increasingly wired city as a result of Hurricane Katrina. Its reasons for doing so were practical in the beginning as *The Nation's* 2006 article [“Don't Mourn, Link”](#) explains. In the weeks right after the storm, “Most phones, cell and otherwise, were useless; only e-mails brought news to and from evacuees” (Tisserand). In the months that followed, though, “residents in a handful of the hardest-hit neighborhoods used ingenuity, creativity, digital cameras, Flickr, WordPress, Google Maps, and Yahoo Groups to bend rebuilding efforts to the will of the people and away from the wrecking balls swung by city government” (Fontana). Blog scholar Axel Bruns would describe these as the actions of “a communications savvy public [who] have altered a dated concept of communication” (72). Such “at the scene” reportage illustrates “a liberating, spontaneous, interactive, public-oriented, and public co-authored network of nearly limitless news and information venues” (Bruns 72). In fact, even if New Orleanians like myself have had opinions about the government and who deserved the blame for such a catastrophe happening

on so many different levels, we had much more important concerns¹⁵, such as when we would we be let back into the city to see things for ourselves and begin to pick up the pieces.

With city-specifics blogs listed at *Metroblogger* and aggregators such as *Placeblogger*, I realize that New Orleans is not alone in being a city that uses technologies to define itself; however, I believe that its bloggers speak more freely and with greater urgency. Mass media coverage of national and natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina can only expose so much because they often interview small populations of survivors, clip their responses into sound bites, and/or edit out the long pauses that come when victims try to speak of the trauma and loss they suffered. By contrast, even four years after the storm, a great number of post-Katrina blog posts are being written with the intent to “find errors or omissions in the reporting conducted by mainstream journalists” (Walker 106).

Blogs also allow users to capture important personal moments, share them with an audience almost instantly, and create a permanent searchable archive for future readers making the New Orleans blogosphere unique in its awareness of how and what it does “on the Internet resound[s] in [their] physical

¹⁵ As a quick aside, when *The DaVinci Code* movie opened all across the country in May of 2006, NOLA.com’s religion writer Bruce Nolan found that local churches and ministers were “too weary to worry about (the) film” (qtd. in McKeever). Dennis Watson of Celebration Church was also quoted, saying: “For most of us in New Orleans, we’re so overwhelmed it’s not even on the radar. This (controversial film) is far more important to people in Dallas, New York and Los Angeles. But in New Orleans, we’re still just struggling to survive” (qtd. in McKeever).

world” (Gurak 147). Indeed, while “the ongoing nature of blogging lends context to even the shortest post,” (Stone 220), even more significant is the collective power of the blogosphere and its ability to “elevate a topic enough to bring about public scrutiny and real-world change” (Stone 205).

Chapter Summaries

This dissertation thus focuses on New Orleanians’ turn to the blogosphere and ultimately argues that the purposeful sharing of frequent, first-hand accounts on transparent blog sites elevates these personal and often emotional utterances, making them ones that are socially responsible. This first chapter demonstrated “the necessity and importance of giving resources and attention to the Web and Web journalism” (Allan 137) and remaining chapters emphasize the value of such user-generated material.

Chapter Two begins with a review of print-based Hurricane Katrina texts to illustrate to extent to which this storm received coverage in a variety of media formats. Focusing on oral histories, I contend that, while detailed, these collections are limited due to the fact that readers never get a second glimpse at the post-Katrina life shared, and, as such, will never know how the person fared in the long run. The latter half of Chapter Two details the affordances of the blog genre to emphasize how this new way of communicating, a way that combines “the immediacy of up-to-the-minute posts, latest first, with a strong sense of the author’s personality, expertise, and point of view” (Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht,

and Swartz 42), allows tech-savvy Katrina survivors to **continue** to put the storm into perspective in ways that oral historians cannot.

In Chapter Three, I reference the growing corpus of scholarly blog research in order to identify the methods commonly used when sampling groups of bloggers and individual blog posts. I close the chapter by outlining my (auto)ethnographic approach to gathering interview data, from my initial contact with fellow New Orleans bloggers to asking them to participate in my interactive interview project on a wiki.

Chapter Four is comprised of profiles of three local bloggers who 1) express their feelings at being misrepresented in the media as people who should have known better and evacuated and 2) document the positive changes they finally do see happening in their neighborhoods. This chapter moves the project toward understanding how these bloggers' post-Katrina lives have become permanently affected by their access to social media technologies as well as draws attention to the ease with which they instantaneously produce and disseminate information related to both local interests and social activist concerns.

Chapter Five concludes by offering my lasting impressions on how social change can be cultivated in virtual communities inspired by a shared, albeit traumatic, experience. I also use this chapter to offer my classroom experiences of examining the writing and technologies employed by New Orleans-based authors since 2005. While my previous focus had been on powerful narratives that evoked emotions, students in recent years have responded more positively

(and more empathetically) when these personal stories are read alongside print-based and digital texts that demonstrate the historical, economic, and racial inequalities the city has experienced both before and after Hurricane Katrina. Similar to how 9/11 is described in the edited collection *Trauma and the Teaching of Writing*, my current pedagogy emphasizes place and life writing in order to contextualize the storm and make it a “teachable moment.”

Chapter Two: Blogging the Unfinished Story

Women, men, and children told and are telling stories of bodies and psyches in pain. And in the future those stories will become more polished and more suspect. That is unavoidable. What is most valuable is the fact that elements of genuine literature are preserved in raw, passionate, uncensored stories of survival rather than in media-constructed stories about survival.

Jerry W. Ward, Jr., *The Katrina Papers: A Journal of Trauma and Recovery* 8

Introduction

Although the date 8/29 will never resonate with Americans the way 9/11 will, many different groups, individuals, and corporate entities have worked to make sense of the events surrounding Hurricane Katrina, using nearly every available media and mode. As of this writing over 150 books have come out since 2005, and many more will be written about the causes and effects of both the hurricane and the levee breaches. Titles such as *Disaster: Hurricane Katrina and The Failure of Homeland Security* (Cooper and Block 2006), *Stormy Weather: Katrina and The Politics of Disposability* (Giroux 2006), and *The Great Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, and the Mississippi Gulf Coast* (Brinkley 2007) expose the ill-preparedness and subsequent breakdown of government offices on the local, state, and federal levels. *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster* (Dyson 2007), *What Lies Beneath: Katrina, Race, and the State of the Nation* (The South End Press

Collective 2007), and *After the Storm: Black Intellectuals Explore the Meaning of Hurricane Katrina* (Troutt, ed. 2007) call attention to preexisting racial and socioeconomic issues in the disenfranchised South as well as explore the impact of the African American diaspora upon the re-population of New Orleans. *The Storm: What Went Wrong and Why During Hurricane Katrina--the Inside Story from One Louisiana Scientist* (van Heerden and Byran 2007), *The Ravaging Tide: Strange Weather, Future Katrinas, and the Coming Death of America's Coastal Cities* (Tidwell 2007), and *Breach of Faith: Hurricane Katrina and the Near Death of a Great American City* (Horne 2006) fuse scientific data with current global warming theory to convince readers that Louisiana wetlands need protection more than ever before.

Few texts celebrate the “raw, passionate, uncensored stories” Jerry W. Ward, Jr. mentions above. Those that do take the form of oral histories, a seemingly natural fit for this documenting this type of disaster. As discussed in “Oral History and Hurricane Katrina: Reflections on Shouts and Silences”:

Events such as Hurricane Katrina shake the foundation of the social structure. As people find a way to process the event, oral historians can play an important role. The recorded narratives, individually and as a whole, are part of the healing process, recognizing the need to understand what occurred and helping to garner hope for the future (Sloan 179).

While “a comprehensive picture of the storm and the countless ways in which it impacted so many seems unfeasible” (Sloan 178), oral historians have taken on

the challenge because they believe locals “telling their own story is important not only as a validation of their own view of their experience but also as an enrichment of the historical record” (Sloan 179). However, there are limits to these texts, even those that make “a concerted effort to talk with individuals that...represent a wide variety of experiences” (Hirsch and Dixon 190), not to mention ethical issues to consider when asking invasive questions during a painful time of loss.

One such limit is awareness of audience. Who is the target audience for these publications? Is it composed of readers who already have a personal connection to New Orleans who want to see how their city and this life-changing event are represented since they knew the television media reportage was limited in scope? Or is it a more general audience interested in historical and sociological perspectives on the tragedy? If it is the latter, then the texts are often constructed to familiarize readers New Orleans as a place unlike any other in the United States and to describe Hurricane Katrina as an event that occurred there in August of 2005. However, if it is the former, this is an audience who can recognize clichés, who are already aware of the countless evacuation and starting over stories, and who know how prolonged the recovery process actually is.

Given my personal interest and loss as a result of the levee breaches destroying my home, I am part of the audience that wants more than these oral histories currently provide. The discussion that follows of two specific oral history collections is less a critique of that genre and more of a proposal for readers to

pay increased attention to the blog medium as it is used in New Orleans. As Laura Gurak and Smiljana Antonijevic write, “Unlike chatting, pointed toward ‘hear me out at this moment,’ blogging is pointed toward ‘hear me out throughout this time’” (65). Editors of oral history collections dedicated to Katrina-related “storm stories,” for example, restrict their interview data to tales of escape, evacuation, and initial returns to the city.¹⁶ Doing so focuses the text on the recording rather than processing of information. New Orleans-based bloggers, on the other hand, use new media channels to their advantage allowing for a more sustained story to occur over time. With free software, they can create a timeline of their lives since the hurricane hit, **and**, most importantly, their audiences can interact with that information.

These locals purposefully started blogging to have control over their Katrina stories, and as a whole this research project aims to mark that motivation. Similar to New Orleans writer Poppy Z. Brite whose fictional characters have evolved from vampires and serial killers to hard-working cooks, these bloggers illustrate how “an ordinary life in New Orleans is so different from one lived anywhere else” (12). Moreover, self-authored and publicly available to anyone with an Internet connection, bloggers do not have to worry about an editor misrepresenting their opinions. In fact, given that the rebuilding process is still going on, it is likely that their early views about Katrina’s impact upon the city have changed along the way. Bloggers have the space to document those shifts

¹⁶ Even four years later, few mainstream media outlets have carried out extended “after the storm” looks at people or places in New Orleans, asking audiences to settle for neatly packaged anniversary specials.

as well as add to their recovery stories. Furthermore, they have an immediate audience and thus the choice/opportunity to dialogue with readers who may agree or disagree with their ideas. This first-person authorship also alleviates ethical concerns about an outside interviewer invading one's privacy so soon after the trauma because bloggers can choose which emotional details to share, when to reflect upon the loss, and how often.

In order to emphasize the ways blogs can exemplify authenticity, continuity, and agency, I begin with reviews of two oral history collections. My intent is to demonstrate the ways in which these texts, although they present "recorded memories [that] have great values" ("Oral History: A Pathfinder"), create more blanks than they fill in when it comes to documenting the reality of post-Katrina New Orleans.

Storm Stories

Voices from the Storm (2006), is part of the larger ongoing Voice of Witness series, edited by Dave Eggers (*A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*) and physician/human rights activist, Lola Vollen. Other books in this series focus on America's wrongfully convicted and exonerated, Sudan's abducted and displaced slaves, and the millions of illegal immigrants "living underground" yet trying to make a life for themselves in the United States. According to the series' website: "The books in the Voice of Witness series seek to illuminate human rights crises by humanizing the victims. By allowing them to tell their stories, we seek to engender greater understanding." As a result,

Voices from the Storm concentrates on revealing (and subsequently getting its audience to understand) what happened to those who, for various reasons, stayed in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina rather than evacuating. In fact, only one of the thirteen narrators mentioned in the introduction “made it out of town the day before the storm and watched on television as his city was engulfed” (Vollen and Ying 2-3). The Table of Contents also exposes this emphasis with its two major headings—LIFE BEFORE THE STORM and THE STORM—the latter of which is separated into episodes for each day between Saturday, August 27 and Sunday, September 4. This chronological organization is meant to offer “the narrators’ day-to-day experiences during what began as the worst natural disaster in American history and ended as a monument to governmental indifference and incompetence” (Vollen and Ying 1). The final three headings—THE WEEK AFTER, WEEKS AFTER THE STORM and LOOKING BACK—take in the narrators’ early feelings about displacement and returning “home.” Yet these episodes are restricted to early opinions collected by interviewers mere months after Katrina hit.¹⁷

One could make the case that unless your readers know your storm story it will be impossible for them to understand your “after the storm” story, but given

¹⁷ *Nursing in the Storm: Voices from Hurricane Katrina* (2009) and *Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans* (2009) reinforce this model of interviewing individuals to gather their recollections of the events since August 29th. Danna and Cordray’s look at the role of nurses as first responders concludes with a look to the future and the impact of Katrina on current emergency response situations. Dan Baum’s book *Nine Lives* offers such comprehensive profiles that you learn more about these locals’ *before* the storm lives and their relationships with the city that raised them rather than how they were changed by the storm.

the fact that the interviews were conducted so soon after the event, “residents [were] in the process of trying to understand what happened while [at the same time] beginning the slow course of mending” (Sloan 178). Still, with the support of “a wide network of interviewers, transcribers, researchers, and interns” (Vollen and Ying 231) and the foresight to both receive approval from their interviewees and fact-check their stories “against news reports, primary source documents, and weather reports” (Vollen and Ying 232), this book is a credible one, precisely because it puts the storm into perspective with the narrators’ pre-Katrina lives in New Orleans.

“Katrina wasn’t bad all the way”

Voices from the Storm’s thirteen narrators share many poignant moments, but I will focus primarily on one, Renee Martin,¹⁸ whose account ends on a more optimistic note than one might ever expect from a disaster narrative. As a child in New Orleans in the 1960s, she survived Hurricane Betsy. As much as she tried to make “the best of things” (qtd. in Vollen and Ying 12) in the years after, she suffered from depression. She tried to prevail, working as a cashier, earning her GED and becoming a clinical nursing assistant in the early 1990s, but when Renee lost her eighteen-year-old son to jaundice in 2003, her depression returned. To make matters worse, after two back surgeries she became addicted

¹⁸ All of the quotations in this section are Renee Martin’s words as quoted in the Vollen and Ying text. For readability purposes, and as suggested by the *MLA Handbook 7th* ed., I have chosen to make the parenthetical documentation more concise, define the source here at the start, and only include page numbers for the remainder of this section.

to her medication. Slowly trying to wean herself off those pills in 2005 and having gone two weeks without them, she left her apartment on Saturday, August 27, and went into New Orleans for shelter from Hurricane Katrina (which she had heard about on the television).

The Monday night after the storm hit, after hearing on the radio that “the main levee had broke” (73), she left her friend’s apartment and waded through the rising water to a nearby building with a second floor. With the power out, she describes the eerie experience of lying outside on the porch:

You couldn’t see anyone. You could hear people hollering, “Help, help.” And all you can see is the stars, so many stars in the sky. More than we saw before when we had electricity. That’s the only light we had, the stars. And it was just so close, so close to me. (74).

The next day she was rescued by boat and brought to the Superdome, a place she felt “Satan was going to take us all” (93). Four days later, on Saturday, September 3, she finally made it onto a Texas-bound bus: “I was so relaxed because I felt like the closer we get to Houston, the more I’m out of danger because I thought that the military in New Orleans would kill us” (149). Whether or not she was in true danger is unknown, but it is clear that Renee Martin’s life significantly changed once in Houston.

After staying only two nights in the Houston Astrodome, alongside hundreds of other displaced New Orleanians and without knowing where any of her family was, she took a chance, got on a bus by herself, and sought out a job

at the West Oaks Nursing Home. Even with her Clinical Nursing Assistant license, she was eager to take the only opening available, a housekeeping job; however, when administrators were apprised of her situation they both hired her and gave her the money to pay for an apartment. In Martin's words, "They helped me way before I got assistance from FEMA" (167), which leads her to refer repeatedly to them as "family." Particularly moving is what she reveals next:

They call me Katrina. 'Hey, Katrina!' At work, they call me Katrina. It never bothers me. I would rather talk about it because I don't like to hold stuff in. I talk about it, but when I talk about it, we start cryin'. I'm like, 'I didn't want to make you cry.'

'But it's so sad,' they say.

That's why they call me Katrina. Katrina at work. But it's okay.

(167-68)

Their persistent identification of Renee with the event that brought her to them may be unsettling to some, but Renee is not bothered by it. Even after regaining contact with her family, she describes her adopted home as "paradise" because "It's totally different. In my old neighborhood in New Orleans, you walk out the door, you see some group of people hanging out and doing wrong" (196). While her sisters, daughter, and mother have all reestablished themselves in New Orleans, she sees Houston as her "big break" (197) and emphatically states, "I'm gonna stay right here because I never advanced myself so fast and so much...Now I don't have to depend on nobody" (197). Despite the loss she has

suffered, with the storm victimizing her in so many ways, she uses this new situation to take a stand and live her life the way she's always wanted.

However, knowing that she had suffered from depression and pill addiction, one might feel her story ends on a bit of a cliffhanger. In other words, readers will never know if "Katrina wasn't bad all the way" (210), which is what she claims in her final excerpt. Not wanting to expect the worst, but recognizing the possibility for post-traumatic stress is great for *all* Katrina survivors (even for journalists and medical professionals¹⁹), I pause when I read her claims that "everything is new and different and better" and that she's "happy every day" (210). While it is certainly possible that her "talking about it" and not "holding stuff in" provoked her "passing out of the isolation imposed by the event" (Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* 11), readers will never know the long-term effects of Hurricane Katrina on her physical and mental health, both of which her narrative reveals were in precarious positions since Hurricane Betsy.

¹⁹ One unfortunate story preceding the first anniversary of the storm was that of *Times-Picayune* photographer, John McCusker, who "was seen driving wildly through the city Tuesday, attracting the attention of police. He eventually was arrested, but not before he was subdued with a Taser and an officer fired twice at his vehicle. During the melee, he begged police to kill him" ("[Stress building in New Orleans; Hurricane Katrina anniversary nears](#)"). According to a friend of the photographer, and New Orleans Metroblogger, "John's home in Lakeview was destroyed and he was under-insured. He is one of the thousands of people in New Orleans who's financial life has been flipped and flopped to where he saw no way out" ("[Suicide by Police](#)"). While the number of therapists available in New Orleans declined drastically in the year after the storm, it should be mentioned that McCusker had been going to therapy sessions three times a week.

“So who’s hurting?”

As I alluded to earlier, Renee Martin’s story offers a uniquely optimistic view of the diaspora. In truth, it is one that is echoed by a few more narrators in the text who admit, “Katrina was a blessing ‘cause Katrina turned my life around” (Thompson qtd. in Vollen and Ying 214) and “Out of every terrible thing, some good comes out of it” (Harris qtd. in Vollen and Ying 222). Yet *Voices from the Storm* as the first of the oral history collections to come out never delves into the actual “dealing with the devastation” side of things, no matter if that devastation was tangible or not. Admittedly, these narrators intend to mark a time in history, primarily the event of Hurricane Katrina; however, this storm destroyed a major American city. Because the collection was published so soon after (in 2006), few of the survivors even had a chance to reflect upon what the city of New Orleans was like when they returned.

The closest one comes to admit the emotional confusion and heartache associated with returning to the city is through the voice of Kalamu Ya Salaam,²⁰ the previously mentioned sole narrator of the thirteen to have evacuated. Most likely, it is **because** he evacuated that he could focus less on himself or what he endured while away, and instead begin to reflect what the city has lost in terms of tradition, population, and meaning of place. In the final pages of the book he reasons, “People who had nothing lost everything, people who had everything lost everything” (Ya Salaam qtd. in Vollen and Ying 220). Simplifying the scope

²⁰ As I did with Renee Martin’s words in the previous section, I provide only page numbers in the parentheses when quoting Kalamu Ya Salaam for the remainder of this section.

of the disaster to that “little saying” (219), he acknowledges Katrina dealt a blow to every income bracket. Speaking openly on the topic of race, he believes “never again will New Orleans be 70 percent black” given that “there are many white people who are very, very happy about the population shift” (220). Using his brother’s flooded out medical practice as an example, he tells readers it was a “practical decision” not for him to reopen: “He can’t. That whole *Field of Dreams* bullshit just doesn’t work in New Orleans, which is if you open it, they will come. Ain’t no buses, ain’t no place to live, you know” (219).

Most relevant to my discussion of emotion is Ya Salaam’s interpretation of what locals experience when they return, something he labels “double displacement” (221). The phenomenon occurs as follows:

People were displaced by the hurricane, moved out of the city. They wanted to come back...[but] when you get back into the city, you find out where you are and who you are is not where you were and who you were. So you’re initially displaced from the city, and then when you get back into the city, you’re displaced from what your memory and assumptions are about what the city is. (221)

Because their loss was compounded by man-made failures (levee breaches) that flooded 80-percent of their city and subsequently forced them to wait elsewhere for weeks before the floodwaters drained, Ya Salaam suggests **every** New Orleanian will struggle with this “double displacement,” yet those stories will have to be found elsewhere.

New Orleans: Proud to Call it Home?

Voices from the Storm is certainly a valuable contribution to the ever-increasing canon of post-Katrina literature; however, it is a book that only begins to scratch the surface of what being a Katrina survivor means. It offers readers a glimpse of what those who stayed went through but not enough about what happened once they returned, which for many is when the trauma really begins. As Kalamu Ya Salaam reveals in the final sentences of his narrative: “We wanted to be back here, but this is not what we wanted. And it seems ungrateful to say, ‘This is not what I want’ when there are so many people who can’t get back into the city, but the fact is this is not home. I’m not back home” (qtd. in Vollen and Ying 221).

Only time will tell if “home” will ever mean the same again for so many New Orleanians like those profiled in this book, but in the case of this published work, time stops in 2006, limiting its interpretation of and reflection upon the event in a way that a blogger is never limited. Still, it is important to recognize that those profiled may not have had the time, resources, literacy skills, or desire to go online with their stories, so their impulse to tell others their impressions of Hurricane Katrina allows them to document and validate their experiences.

Embedding oral historians within affected communities so soon after tragic events has become customary because the “recounting of experiences is raw and yet also precise in a different sense, and valuable for that reason” (Sloan 181). Historians themselves ponder the *how*, *why*, and *when* involved in this process, with the *when* being most deliberated given the emotions exposed;

however, my critique of the oral history collections reviewed in this chapter results from the *what*. Like the long list of Katrina-related texts devoted to discussion of the disaster's political, geographic, and economic implications, these historians' interviews all focus on the event of Katrina rather than the day-to-day life of a survivor trying to rebuild. While it is true that oral historians' work "is important because the established frameworks of history fall short" (Sloan 182), New Orleans bloggers, by virtue of the affordances of blog software, can share their Katrina-related stories in spaces that allow for 1) the ebb and flow of their recovery to be documented, 2) the audience to interact with these posts, **and** 3) the creation of a permanent archive those recollections.

"How did you do in the storm?"

Before delving into an extended discussion of the blog genre, though, I offer a review of *Voices Rising: Stories from the Katrina Narrative Project*, published in 2008. This collection of 31 stories collected by University of New Orleans students and edited by Rebeca Antoine attempts to offer a greater variety of accounts of what happened to people during the hurricane, both to those who stayed and those who left:

The wrenching details vary from individual to individual, but each New Orleanian knows that no other New Orleanian escaped untouched and consequently changed by this unprecedented and psychologically debilitating event. "How did you do in the storm?"

proceeds from an understanding, however, painful, of something shared. (Barton 218)

However, as with *Voices From the Storm*, the majority of accounts were “gathered in those first few months following Katrina, when the anguish and implausibility of the scope of the disaster was still fresh” (Antoine 15). Unlike the extended memories of 13 narrators woven chronologically across the entire text of *Voices From the Storm*, the 31 interviewees featured in *Voices Rising: Stories from the Katrina Narrative Project* are restricted a few pages each. Different, too, is the structure of these narratives. Their candid takes on what happened are either framed as answers to specific questions (labeled “as told to”); conversational dialogues with an interviewer (labeled “interviewed by”); or as short monologues (labeled “in his/her own words”).

Rather than organize the stories by neighborhood, by “those who stayed” versus “those who evacuated” or, as was the case in *Voices from the Storm*, in exhaustive chronological order, the editor of this collection, Rebeca Antoine, offers no organizational structure whatsoever. Readers are merely told in the opening editorial note that the 31 narratives featured were narrowed down from a field of hundreds of manuscripts and interviews, making it a mere “selection representative of the entire collection which is currently housed at the University of New Orleans” (Antoine 15). Consequently, due to the brevity of these episodes, missing is the element of storytelling needed to provide readers with context. Also absent is any suggestion of how these narrators have fared since sharing those initial impressions. What you read is what you get. For this

reason, I find the book fails to validate these individuals' experiences, and the following two examples will illustrate what I mean.

“You always have faith”

The collection begins with a narrative shared by an elderly married couple, the Lozano's,²¹ and a somber tone is set as they admit, “We Thought We Made the Right Decision.” This title anticipates the loss of their home, but given that their story is only three pages long, it is not much more than an overview. Readers learn they lived in the Gentilly neighborhood fifty years and chose to stay in their home to ride out the storm because they had “rode out [Hurricane] Betsy²² [in 1965] with no problem” (qtd. in Antoine 17). Skipping over the details of the storm passing through, Leonard Lozano quickly focuses on when he and his wife began noticing “water in the street rising” (17). They “stayed in the house for four and a half days” (17) although we never learn whether or not they were on a second floor, in the attic, or on their roof. After hanging a sheet on the front porch saying, “Please help us,” they were rescued and brought to the nearby University of New Orleans campus.

Unlike the many Katrina stories told about the Superdome and Convention Center, this story offers an alternate rescue story, one that is not imbued with

²¹ Once again, for readability purposes, when quoting The Lozano's, I define the source here at the start, and only include page numbers in parentheses for the remainder of this section.

²² Similar to Hurricane Katrina, Hurricane Betsy hit Louisiana as a strong Category 3 storm, drove a storm surge into Lake Pontchartrain, and caused levee breaches that led to severe flooding of the city of New Orleans.

fear or anger. Mr. Lozano mentions losing hope “when a helicopter didn’t arrive when they said it would” (18), but we never learn where the helicopters took them when they did arrive. Instead, he moves on to assert that he and his wife are “lucky” that they are “able to start over from zero” (18). Immediately after that statement, though, he unexpectedly brings up his 89-year-old brother who is in a nursing home. They have been unable to contact him, leading Mr. Lozano to close his narrative with this plea: “I hope that St. Anna’s, which has a history of a hundred and fifty years of service, will get him back. I’m worried he’ll die, and I won’t find out” (19). As many who paid attention to Hurricane Katrina news may be aware, both hospital and nursing home patients had to endure horrific conditions²³, many dying as a result of the heat and floodwaters destroying all wiring and backup generator power. So the fact that Mr. Lozano’s narrative ends here raises serious questions: Did St. Anna’s evacuate all of its patients? Would the brothers reconnect?

As disjointed as Mr. Lozano’s narrative is, even more harrowing is his wife Audrey’s contribution, or lack thereof, which immediately follows his closing comment about his brother:

I’m sorry. I thought I could do this, but I can’t. I’ve been trying to forget that week for three months now, and, listening to Leonard, I don’t want to talk about it. You see, it makes it all come back to

²³ See the data collected on “Hospitals in Hurricane Katrina: Challenges Facing Custodial Institutions in a Disaster” at http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/411348_katrinahospitals.pdf and “Storm Evacuations: Elderly Were Left With Weak Safety Net” at <http://www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/metropolitan/3516805.html>

me. [Her face is flushed, and she's trying not to cry.] Whatever Leonard says, say the same thing for me. Now I have a headache, and it's really bad. I can't remember what I'm supposed to do next. I just don't know. I don't know why in the hell this had to happen to me, but I don't want to talk about it. (19)

After such an expressionless rendering of their story by her husband, Mrs. Lozano's grief is overpowering. But, again, it raises questions: While one can assume their home was completely destroyed by water, where did they end up immediately after and in the months after the storm? What was lost? Where are they living now and where are their family members? What is starting over from zero really like? It is really a "lucky" situation for an elderly couple to be in or has it advanced psychological and physical ailments, as suggested by Mrs. Lozano's testimony?

While it is unclear why the editor decided to open the collection with this seemingly incomplete narrative, it does propel the reader forward. In the accounts that follow we learn about more neighborhoods and the varying levels of destruction in each. Perhaps most importantly, we meet residents of all ages with "stories that this life-changing event has produced who were brave and unguarded enough to share them" (Antoine 14).

"Are you ready to see the house?"

Late in the edited collection readers hear answers to a few of the Lozano's questions, but from another married couple. From the neighborhood of

Chalmette and significantly younger than the Lozano's, Ralph and Marjorie Guidry²⁴ tell their story in "This Could Happen Again Next Year." Set up as a question and answer interview with a University of New Orleans graduate student, Kristin Schwartz, they share what it was like to drive back into Louisiana and assess the damage. In the end, Marjorie Guidry cannot help but speculate "bad things gonna happen again" (qtd. in Antoine 174).

While the outside of their house looked as if it "was hardly damaged" (171), once Ralph Guidry went inside, he saw "Everything was all messed up" due to their having "over nine feet of water" flood the home (172). The conversation with his interviewer continues:

Kristin: Over nine feet?

Ralph: Over nine feet. I had anywhere from two inches to eight inches of mud, depending on where you went in the house. I had a TV set that was up in the main room; well, somehow it ended up in our bedroom. We eat a lot of rice, and we had big storage boxes, and I didn't know what happened to them. What happened was they ended up in our bedroom.

Kristin: The rice did?

Ralph: Yeah. We had a king size bed that weighed over 400 pounds, and it was underneath the bed. The bed propped up by the rice storage bins.

²⁴ For the final time in this chapter, please note that the source of this oral history is defined here at the start and then marked only by page numbers for the remainder of this section.

Marjorie: Our house was intact, you see? [She shows a picture of the exterior of her house].

Ralph: I think this is the flood line [he points up near the roof in the picture].

Marjorie: You see these houses [showing a picture of her street]...you can see how the water got in there, but look at how intact it is. My car was on the driveway...but see, it washed over to the house. This is the inside [Shows a picture of the interior of the house] (172)

The images conjured up by this description are more vivid than any shared thus far. Readers previously unable to comprehend what flood waters can do to destroy a home can now realize their severity, e.g. their ability to lift a 400-pound bed. The only thing left after hearing descriptions of what that might look like is to see pictures of it, which as the exchange above reveals, the Guidry's interviewer had the opportunity to. These parenthetical phrases may leave readers in suspense since they will never get to see the pictures, but this is already a more sensory story than the Lozano's.

Truthful throughout their interview, the Guidry's admit the pain of losing photo albums from their wedding and travels and the realization of all the little things they would have to replace, such as a shower curtain, sharp knife, a cutting board, a stapler, a pair of scissors (173-74). They also speak of the loss of their neighbors and their feelings about rebuilding in a neighborhood that now "is a wasteland" (175), closing their narrative with the following exchange:

Ralph: The thing with us going back out there is that fixing the levees to the way they were is unacceptable because this thing could happen next year, and we were traumatized by it.

Marjorie: I don't want to go back in that house and every day think about what happened. I mean, I still love my house, but you gonna be there every day, and bad things gonna happen again, and....

Ralph: I could see myself—I'm a little of the nervous type—every time they'd have a hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico, I'd...I'd be, I'd have an anxiety attack. I just don't want to go through it again.

(174-75)

Even with the admission of anxiety about future storms, as with the Lozano's excerpt, readers are left wondering the fate of another married couple and whether or not they chose to rebuild. What these final words suggest, as do so many other stories in *Voices Rising*, is the sad reality that very few New Orleanians have the ability "to return to their homes and, in many cases, the lives they led before the storm" (Barton 240). For those who do choose to rebuild, they may be the only house on the block doing so, as suggested by both the Guidry's use of the word "wasteland" (qtd. in Antoine 175).

Concluding this collection is an afterword that echoes this uneven recovery. Authored by Fredrick Barton, former University of New Orleans Provost and Professor of English, he shares an extended version of his own experience, taking readers from his first awareness of Hurricane Katrina on August 24, 2005, all the way through November 12, 2007. Unlike the shorter

narratives shared throughout *Voices Rising*, Barton takes the time to look at his surroundings, move beyond his individual story, and notice the lack of progress:

In neighborhood after neighborhood throughout the city, homes are windowless, abandoned, forlorn—properties melting into uselessness like soft plastic figurines left atop a hot stove. So short a time ago, each of these decaying edifices was someone’s home where good, spicy food simmered in the kitchen and the laughter of full lives echoed within its walls. Now the air smells of mold and mildew, and inside the walls silence reigns. Ruined lawns, broken sidewalks, rubble-strewn vacant lots and streets breed despair, house to house, block to block. (240)

Closing with those images leaves the reader with a sense of what life in post-Katrina New Orleans is truly like. For this reason, I find the *Voices Rising* collection valuable because of its overall emphasis on the raw emotions stirred when recollecting the storm, both by those who stayed and those who evacuated. My bias may be because of the inclusion of narratives that mention my own Gentilly neighborhood, a place I feel the mainstream media overlooked. However, while the episodes reveal concrete details about the series of life changes precipitated by Hurricane Katrina, I still critique this text as being one that raises more questions than it answers. Yes, these narrators were all granted the chance to bear witness to this historical and social moment in time, but will their stories ever have the reach that the diverse blogosphere has?

With that question asked, the remainder of this chapter will focus on the affordances of blogs, particularly their episodic structure, their impact upon journalism, and their potential for transforming words and messages into action.

Defining the Genre

Instead of relying upon the 2004 Merriam-Webster [“Word of the Year”](#) definition, which briefly describes the blog as “a Web site that contains an online personal journal with reflections, comments, and often hyperlinks provided by the writer,” academics and Internet researchers have begun to depend upon prolific Norwegian blogger, Jill Walker’s definition. Now published in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, she first posted it on her blog, *jill/txt*:

A weblog, or blog, is a frequently updated website consisting of dated entries arranged in reverse chronological order so the most recent post appears first. Typically, weblogs are published by individuals and their style is personal and informal. Weblogs first appeared in the mid-1990s, becoming popular as simple and free publishing tools became available towards the turn of the century. Since anybody with a net connection can publish their own weblog, there is great variety in the quality, content, and ambition of weblogs, and a weblog may have anywhere from a handful to tens of thousands of daily readers. ([“final version of weblog definition”](#))

Walker has gone on to extend this definition in her book, *Bloggging*. She even refers to blogging as “not a genre but as a medium” with bloggers choosing “to

work within the set of constraints and affordances offered by blogging software” (Walker 20), further increasing the capacity of information published online to make a greater, and continuous, impact upon our everyday lives.

Current statistics also support the fact that the blog is one of the fastest growing, social mediums for writing, with reports published by the *Pew Internet and American Life Project* (Rainie, January 2005 and Smith, July 2008) and *Technorati* (reports published annually 2004-2009). These studies show: 1) an increase in blog creation, although the majority of bloggers admit to not updating their blogs every day, 2) an increase in those who recognize/understand what the term “blog” means, 3) an increase in those who read blogs or online journals, and 4) an increase in the viability of blogs as news and information outlets.

Why people create and maintain blogs ranges from shameless self-promotion to confessional testimony to citizen journalism, although it is the latter of the three that the mainstream media has paid the most attention to since it was the speed with which bloggers exposed/reported facts that might have otherwise gone unnoticed that led to the resignations and/or public apologies of Trent Lott, Dan Rather, CNN’s Eason Jordan, and many others. While “whistle blowing” or “gatewatching” does not occur on all blogs, it is an aspect of the genre that demonstrates the empowering ability of the Internet.

Newsbloggers

Writing in digital environments enables people to state their opinions and (potentially) to transform their words and messages into action, politically

oriented or otherwise. A key volume in the Polity Press Digital Media and Society series, Jill Walker's book *Blogging* identifies three ways blogs intersect with journalism. She believes "blogs and other participatory media are changing the ways journalism works" (Walker 86) because bloggers can:

1. Give first-hand reports from ongoing events,
2. Tell stories that might just as well have been told by mainstream media but, without editorial or time constraints, can investigate it more critically and thoughtfully, and/or
3. Carefully monitor every news item about a particular issue.

(Walker 86)

This third type of blogger is often referred to as a "filterblogger" or "gatewatcher," which is most attune with my observations of Katrina bloggers. For instance, nearly all of my interview subjects admitted to either starting or devoting their blog to the topic of Hurricane Katrina because they "felt an obligation to write a lot about the things that everyone seems to be forgetting" ("NOLA Bloggers Wiki"). Responses like these will be explored further in Chapter Four, but with reference to this chapter's discussion of the blog genre, I find a clear connection between my interview data and Walker's description of posts authored by individuals that are "Deliberately written to be shared...written with care and wit" (11). Walker adds that these bloggers, who choose to go public, use "their writing as a mirror that allows them to see themselves more clearly and to construct themselves as subjects in a digital society" (12). This too will be explicated in later chapters, but suffice it to say the New Orleans blogger

community I have researched proves to be one built upon the shared experience of Hurricane Katrina and focused on reporting the facts surrounding and actions needed for recovery to take place.

“The news may be too important to leave to the journalists alone”

Nowadays if a citizen is an expert in a field, no matter how minute, in a blog space they have the (respons)ability to make that knowledge public. This way, the blog can be used as a learning space with both those who post and those who comment upon posts forming a genuine community. Referencing the Rathergate²⁵ scandal of 2004, Walker writes: “If an issue generates interest in the blogosphere, many minds can think together in ways that can be extremely powerful” (108). A. Michael Fromkin’s essay “Technologies for Democracy” extends this argument for the dialectical further when he writes,

Blogging encourages citizens to embark on the intellectual exercise of viewing life from the perspective of others, to try to walk in each other’s shoes, to respect each other enough to engage in honest discourse, and to recognize in each other sufficient basic rights so

²⁵ According to MediaMythBusters, “Rathergate is the scandal surrounding the 60 Minutes II story aired on CBS in 2004 about George W. Bush's National Guard service. Memos providing the basis for many of the claims in the report were supposedly created in 1973 and found in the files of the late Lieutenant Colonel Jerry B. Killian. Bloggers and blog readers investigated the suspicious looking documents which were made available to the public on the CBS website and found them to almost certainly be poor forgeries created on a modern era word processor. Four CBS employees lost their jobs over the report. Dan Rather famously defended the report, claiming the memos might be "fake, but accurate" and later went into early retirement” ([“Rathergate”](#)).

as to create the autonomy needed to make the discourse possible.

(11)

Agreeing with these opinions and extending the discussion to consider the point of view of “audiences [who] have become active users” (72) is Axel Bruns, author of *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond*. Bruns spends much of his fourth chapter dedicated to news blogs and sets up dichotomies between conventional and citizen journalists. He celebrates the incompleteness of news and process-driven stories allowed by the user-led Internet environment rather than the product-based journalistic evaluation, favoring “a distributed process of correspondence aimed towards the continuing evaluation of news” (Bruns 83). This emphasis on news “as material for” rather than “as resulting from” (Bruns 83) is especially valuable after natural and national disasters since professional journalists eventually have to move on to other stories, as do oral historians. Extending the story beyond first impressions to include a “range of plausible, multiperspectival interpretations of available news reports in context” (Bruns 83) is what bloggers do when they publish daily or weekly accounts of what they witness, and activity by the New Orleans blogosphere over the past four years is proof positive of that.

Temporal Structuring

Returning to my contrast between oral histories and blogs, blogs are also episodic in structure, sometimes labeled as “unfinished artifacts” (Bruns 83). Consider too Jill Walker’s description of how a reader gets to “know” a blogger:

To really understand blogs, you need to read them over time.

Following a blog is like getting to know someone, or like watching a television series. Because blogging is a cumulative process, most posts presuppose some knowledge of the history of the blog, and they fit into a larger story. There's a very different sense of rhythm and continuity when you follow a blog, or a group of blogs, over time, compared to simply reading a single post that you've found through a search engine or by following a link from another website.

(4)

While one can make the argument that oral histories do not claim to be complete stories, "going to press" still establishes an end date to the narrative. Citing Peter Brooks, Walker discusses "narrative desire," that aspect of reading "with a certainty that there will **be** an end and that, when we have reached it, we will be able to look back and see the whole" (qtd. in Walker 115). However, "Narratives in blogs differ... They are episodic and are published in the same time frame as that of their readers. They are generally not driven towards an ending, toward closure, as traditional narratives are" (Walker 126). As suggested by my earlier critiques, neither *Voices from the Storm* nor *Voices Rising: Stories From the Katrina Narrative Project* suggest supplementary places or websites to learn more about the people profiled in their texts. Once published, those narratives established an end date to the event of Hurricane Katrina, even though the recovery process was just beginning.

An Interlude

The prologue to this dissertation offered my “riding out the storm” narrative, but it is only in the blog posts I wrote in the months and years **after** Hurricane Katrina hit that I began to interpret the consequences of that event. During the hectic days of that hurricane week, while others focused on blaming the government, I had been suffering a communications breakdown due to not being able to locate my parents. However, once my parents arrived to stay with me in Tampa for two weeks, I felt the need to try and begin the process of finding out if they might qualify for federal aid. Little did I know I would first require technical assistance:

[“FEMA SUCKS!!!”](#)

Friday, September 9, 2005, 9:12 p.m.

Ok, yet another reason to be annoyed as hell with FEMA. I’m trying to apply online for my parents [via my Mac Powerbook] and got this message:

In order to use this site, you must have JavaScript Enabled and Internet Explorer version 6. Download it from Microsoft or call 1-800-621-FEMA (3362) to register.

Whatever!

Award-winning fiction writer Margaret Atwood has said that there are “three questions most often posed to writers, both by readers and by themselves: *Who are you writing for? Why do you do it? Where does it come from?*” (xix). In the case of the blog post above, I was writing to vent my frustration with a PC-

dominant government to anyone who cared to listen as well as to make it known that there was yet another reason to find fault with FEMA's handling of Hurricane Katrina. The post came out of the anger that a government website would neglect that segment of America that is comprised of Macintosh users, particularly a segment so obviously desperate for assistance after a disaster.

The responses I received to this particular post, though, reveal the range of a worldwide audience's opinions, empathy, and expertise:

Joanna Says:

September 14th, 2005, 7:51 a.m.

Just the kind of message that someone whose nerves are wracked to the extreme needs to read. Geeeeeeez.

Baron Schwing Says:

September 16th, 2005, 12:42 a.m.

I have been trying to get my elderly parents a trailer or portable home and FEMA says they have none available, but they purchased all the travel trailers from the local market to house their employees. Also the tuesday after the storm hit FEMA disconnected the repeaters for the First Responders so they could have their own radio system hooked up. Why do they need radios to write checks? They suck, I am glad the director was canned and a Firefighter took over FEMA.

~ Lt. Schwing 3rd Dist Fire Dept. Jefferson Parish, LA.

James Says:

September 28th, 2005, 1:48 p.m.

If you enable the debug menu in Safari you can set the User Agent to MSIE 6.0. The site will work just fine after this and you can fill out the forms for your parents with no problem.

Just remember to set the User Agent back to Automatically Chosen after your done.

To find out how to enable the debug menu, search on macosxhints.com or google for it. I can't remember the command right off the top of my head.

Paul Says:

September 28th, 2005, 1:57 p.m.

I can't get beyond the "server unavailable message". Lucky you!

Craig Beck Says:

November 16th, 2005, 11:23 a.m.

FEMA sucks ass

FEMA has a nice little website where you can apply for aid.

However, "to complete your application online you must be using Microsoft's Internet Explorer 6.0 or above." no, really.

What a fucking load of crap. The people impacted by the disaster have suffered enough without havinnng to deal with this sort of total

fucking bullshit. What moron at FEMA decided to put together an assistance website that only runs on IE 6.0 on Windows XP. I'm sure all the poor people who have older computers running Windows 98, ME or whatever are really wishing they'd upgraded now. Oh wait, they probably lost everything they have anyway and don't have power. Sure, Windows XP is the leading OS, and other systems (Mac OS X, Mac OS 7-9, all Linux, older Windows versions) are small minorities of the population, but.... oh wait... no butts, minorities don't count in the Bush administration except where they can further the Bush Agenda. Billionaires are useful, multi-millionaires are too, CEOs of Fortune 500's (never enough of them to go around, we really should do something to help them out), token non-white people to spew the Bush PR garbage—all priceless.

Stupid fucking bunch of assholes.

If we consider those who leave comments bloggers too, their reasons for writing vary from commiserating, voicing their anger, attempting to offer technical assistance, and flat-out Bush bashing. While I did not know any of these respondents, they serendipitously became part of my support system. Unlike online support groups that focus on medical or personal problems, many of which “encourage learning through shared experiences [and] enable participants to offer and receive emotional support in a climate of trust, equality, and empathy” (Preece 33), this group of respondents' comments served to remind me that

Hurricane Katrina (as much as the mainstream media has tried to construct it) was **not** a “shared” experience. Everyone’s evacuation or riding out the storm, rebuilding or relocating story is different and, like the blog scholars quoted earlier affirm, posting these stories online can offer a more authentic side to the event as well as offer both the writer and reader access to a community of fellow experts.

Jill Walker also writes that subjectivity is representative of the medium because, “For bloggers, who generally do not aspire to being journalists, trying to stay objective is completely irrelevant” (95). Reflecting upon my post-Katrina blog posts from late-2005 until now, two of which are excerpted below, I did not withhold my emotions. By directing my writing to a seemingly invisible and non-judgmental audience, my blog space became a place to embark upon a journey of healing.

My initial return to New Orleans occurred in November of 2005, 3 months after Hurricane Katrina hit. I refused to see my house, or what was left of it, and opted instead to meet up with friends in the unharmed French Quarter. It wasn’t until March of 2006 that I saw my neighborhood for the first time, and my recollection of that day is below:

[“My return to NOLA”](#)

Thursday, March 9, 2006, 12:26 p.m.

I wasn’t as nervous as I thought because the weather was so pretty this day, I had AC with me, and somehow I knew we could deal with this quickly. I had asked that we just do a driving tour and not

go inside, but my dad needed help moving a fountain that had survived so we were gonna be parked there for awhile. When we took the turn down Filmore, I couldn't believe all the houses that were now empty, including my childhood friend Rose's. Everything was desolate except for a handful of homes that had a trailer parked next door who were attempting to clean up. When we finally turned down St. Anthony, I pointed out the bike path I had ridden on and told AC that it led to the University of NO and Lake Pontchartrain. It was so strange seeing all these houses that looked pretty much fine on the outside but had that spray painted marking on the front door noting that the National Guard had checked for bodies. My dad also pointed out holes in the roofs which meant that people had had to escape from their attics to be airlifted out. Lots of houses had added their own spray paint messages. When we made it to my house my tears has started but I controlled them... Anyway, I saw the waterline all the way up the side of my house, then the backyard, then went inside. Everything looked so much smaller, the mold was crawling up the walls, and the floorboards were uneven and crunched when you stepped on them. I went to my most recent bedroom first and still was amazed at how everything sort of looked the same shape and size but felt danker. One could probably salvage what is left but my parents don't want to. My mom especially cannot fathom sleeping in that house

knowing that it had once been filled up with water and so much decay. I went to the other rooms and it was strange to see the sun pouring through the windows onto the dirty floor and mold. I made my tour as quick as possible and took photos of memorable spots. My friend Greg called right before I went in and said he'd be home after so to keep from crying my mind stayed focused on visiting him. I think I would have had a bigger breakdown if the house still had some of my stuff in it, but because it was empty, it was easier to process. I think one of my fears had been the emptiness of it all so it's ironic that that is what became so comforting.

While this was an emotional day for me, looking back on this post and the details I managed to cram into one long paragraph, it is clear I was still numb and denying my emotions. My voice wavers between evocative and stilted, yet I felt it important to share this event with my blog audience, an audience curious to hear how my family and friends in New Orleans have been doing. Some comments I received included, "I feel your pain! It's indescribable;" and "I almost cry every time I think about the life we had pre K. I feel your pain as I read and view every part of what you are going through." Receiving these comments are part of what kept me blogging—fulfilling my audience's expectations.

Moreover, awareness of my already sympathetic audience made me comfortable enough to share moments of anger and ask direct questions as I did the in the post below, written in 2006 upon my return from a trip to Hawaii:

["unpacking and packing again"](#)

Thursday, June 8, 2006, 1:47 p.m.

So I am at a beautiful botanical garden in Hawaii and I see a man wearing a Tulane MBA shirt. He is videoing his wife and they're making up witty facts about the waterfall flowing behind them.

Although I am not one to talk to strangers, I decide that their banter is welcoming and I can remark about how me and my Hawaiian host both went to Loyola. I do this and the guy asks when we graduated. I say 1996. He says, "I got out just before Katrina." So I imagine this business school fella literally evacuating with diploma in hand. His wife then chimes in, "You graduated 2 years ago!" And he says, "Well comparable to them in 1996..." I say no more.

Actually I think I mumble that I am actually from New Orleans, but don't even bother to see if they heard me. I just resume taking pics. What the f***? Why on earth would he say something like that when he didn't have to deal with the storm in any way? Was he actually looking for sympathy? And to think that I often hold back from telling people about my loss because I don't feel like I had to endure what so many of my friends did. Being the person that I am, I didn't dare start a verbal sparring with this guy in the middle of a botanical garden, but the episode has lingered with me.

What do you think?

Writing in a public space rather than private allowed me to speak out against what I deemed to be a hypersensitive situation. As I stated, "I didn't dare start a

verbal sparring,” but posting it online allowed me an opportunity to think about the authenticity of experience as well as put my sense of self in relation to others.

Two of the seven comments I received offered the following insights:

Doc Says:

June 8, 2006, 6:06 p.m.

I think that if he graduated two years ago, he graduated just one year before Katrina. His sense of trauma may be quite real– “Boy, I finished up just a year before the Big One hit!” I’d give him the benefit of the doubt.

Mike Says:

June 11, 2006, 2:28 p.m.

His “just before” is different from your “just before,” just as your being “from” NO is different from the being “from” NO of those who lived through the evacuation, as your penultimate paragraph indicates.

Interactive sites like blogs allow anyone with an Internet connection to write, read, or comment upon a post making it a site for dialogue. Had I not shared my opinions, I never would have received those replies; had my readers never come across my post, they would not know of the emotions I feel about my childhood home or the guilt I feel for even labeling myself a “Katrina victim.” Most importantly, had my readers not already followed my blog posts from August

2005 they would not be familiar with my story, with the “rhythm and continuity” (Walker 4) of my blog space.

Conclusion

As the interlude above illustrates, Hurricane Katrina has elicited many emotions and questions since it hit in 2005. This chapter has attempted to illustrate how the web offers more innovative ways for both 1) survivors to witness and document times of crisis *and* the aftermath of destruction and 2) audiences to read and respond to a myriad of perspectives regarding the extent of the trauma, loss, and grief surrounding this event. Beginning a dialogue through public writing can advance their healing, “especially at a time when [they] might not have the energy or resources to seek out people who’ve shared [their] experiences” (Grossman). Writing about the process of rebuilding their homes allows these local bloggers to work through and make meaning of their loss as well as recall the memories of what their lives were like before August 29, 2005. Whether writing posts in diary-style or topic-driven format, whether or not their intent is to persuade or enlighten audiences beyond themselves, the examples provided in Chapter Four will illustrate the extent to which the post-Katrina blogosphere is dominated by authentic updates.

I refer to Anne Ruggles Gere’s essay “Whose Voice Is It Anyway?” to close this chapter because it speaks to the topic of authenticity in first-person writing. Gere’s belief that “the finely textured personal and autobiographical writing now emerging in the academy leads us to public and social contexts

rather than private and individualistic ones” (26) reminds us to recognize those distinctions and overlaps whenever possible. In my case, this has come through in my opening prologue and this chapter’s interlude. My narrative celebrates personal expression and utilizes a colloquial tone, which is also a signature trait of the best blog writing²⁶, yet I have chosen my examples carefully so to give my voice context. As Gere describes it in relation to classroom writing:

We often consider our students’ voices separate from the particular family history, significant persons, and events that helped to shape them. We forget that “authentic” means relational. To describe a voice as authentic is to put it in relationship to other voices (27-28).

So, although my narrative has obviously been shaped by the event of Hurricane Katrina, it also mentions key people in my life as well as those who have left comments and includes their voices alongside mine, thereby helping me illustrate my feelings about my home and the passion I feel for the place and traditions of New Orleans.

Fueled by the reality that everything would be different “after the storm,” my focus on the New Orleans blogosphere as a dialectic space for giving and receiving testimony prompts a discussion of authenticity, particularly in embodied writing that attempts to make sense of the world and subsequently take an activist stance. The examples provided from here on out are all from people who believe their expressions can make a difference, even if that difference is simply

²⁶ Compare two takes on what makes a blog successful: <http://alex.halavais.net/the-perfect-blog-entry/> and <http://www.chrisbrogan.com/seven-blog-improvements-you-can-make-today/>.

a more empathetic audience. Again, I agree with Sherry Turkle when she writes that our lives on the screen need not be treated as alternative lives or thought of as separately constructed identities (263). The writing we do via the Internet is embodied, fully accessible, and frequently updated—ongoing, real-time catharses, if you will. Writing in public spaces rather than private both relieves and heals these disaster victims because they can speak out against the economic, political, and socially unjust realities the city is dealing with, not to mention the media's uninformed takes on what the city's recovery should or should not symbolize.

Chapter Three: Fieldwork in the Blogosphere

“Internet research” or “Internet-based research” refers to a wide array of studies—from text-based analyses of large corpora to studies of persons and behavior online. In some studies, the Internet is used mainly as a tool for collecting data or to solicit participants...In other studies, the focus is people’s lives online or their lives on the screen...But the Internet is not one entity—there are innumerable Internet tools, texts, and communities to be studied, especially on the World Wide Web, each raising specific contextual, methodological, and ethical issues for researchers.

Heidi A. McKee and James E. Porter,
“Preface,” *The Ethics of Internet Research* xvii

Introduction

Studying one of the “innumerable” communities on the Internet, in particular a place-specific blogosphere, requires a carefully considered methodology. While the numbers of publications and conference panels that pay theoretical and empirical attention to blogs have steadily increased over the past decade, there still exists a “murkiness” (McKee and Porter 81) to the Internet that challenges researchers in inimitable ways. Before outlining the methods and online interactions I relied upon to collaborate with my core set of New Orleans bloggers, I will briefly summarize and critique two blog research studies, one from 2004 and the other from 2009. Each study sampled blogs written by “ordinary people,” employed mixed-methods approaches, and articulated the relationship between those methods and the findings. Consequently, each

further motivated my own ethnographic investigation. Moreover, in addition to noting the precedent set forth by these studies, I speculate how changes in these researchers' methods might have yielded different results. Doing so allows me to discuss how such variations influenced my own decisions about what I wanted my research to do and ultimately offer the field.

“I’m Blogging This”

“Why We Blog” is an ethnographic study that deals solely with understanding the motivations of bloggers. Because of this, it very much inspired the organization of my study, particularly its characterization of the blog genre alongside interview data. The researchers' interviews, like mine, “were conversational in style but covered a fixed set of questions about informants' blogs, blogging habits, thoughts on blogging, and use of other communication media as compared to blogs” (Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, and Swartz 2). As a result, readers get to know the research participants through their ruminations on the genre. Nardi, et al. worked with technologically savvy individuals (as did I), with their sample comprised of “well-educated, middle-class adults in school or employed in knowledge work or artistic pursuits” (2). However, unlike my focus on the citizen journalist potential of blog spaces, at the time of their data collection (April-June 2003), the blog genre was just beginning to gain mainstream media attention. This is likely why their study focused solely on 1) determining “why people blog,” and 2) how, with an acute awareness of

audience, that blogging exemplifies “an enormous variety of expression within a simple, restricted format” (Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, and Swartz 3).

From the 23 bloggers interviewed, the “Why We Blog” researchers “discovered five major motivations for blogging: documenting one’s life; providing commentary and opinions; expressing deeply felt emotions; articulating one’s ideas through writing; and forming and maintaining community forums” (Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, and Swartz 3). Noting too that “These motivations are by no means mutually exclusive and might come into play simultaneously” (3), Nardi, et al. support their understanding of the medium through a variety of examples and thus illustrate “the easy way [bloggers] move between the personal and the profound” (4).

Regarding genre, this study describes blogs as more expressive than static websites, with one participant remarking how on web pages “you don’t hear [the author’s] voice in the same way” (Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, and Swartz 3). Just as Jill Walker emphasized the rhythm of frequent and brief posts, these bloggers felt the immediacy of reverse chronological postings allowed them to provide more complete commentary. Most applicable to my research is what Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, and Swartz determined in their “Blogs as Catharsis” section:

Blogs helped explore issues the authors felt “obsessive” or “passionate” about. Blogs gave people a place to “shout,” or express themselves by writing to an audience of sometimes total

strangers, sometimes their best friends and colleagues and family members.

The format of frequent posts, diary-style, was both outlet and stimulus for working through personal issues. A blog often serves as a relief valve, a place to “get closure out of writing,” as Lara said of a post on the death of her grandfather. Another claimed, “I just needed to, like, get it out there.” Others needed to “let off steam.”

(4)

As Chapter Four will illustrate, my interviewees shared similar responses regarding how they use their blogs to express themselves as well as how their awareness of “regular readers helped keep the writing moving along” (Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, and Swartz 5). Prioritizing those blogs written for smaller audiences and including bloggers who use their blogs to work through issues, this study outlined for me a general way to begin eliciting data. The next study, however, prompted me to move beyond the “why” and reflect upon the humanity and diversity of the Hurricane Katrina experience.

Storytellers and Watchdogs

Taking what has already been established about the blog genre in Chapter Two, specifically the convergence of web 2.0 tools upon the journalism industry, Sue Robinson’s recent *New Media and Society* article argues that online interactivity can construct news differently. In “If you had been with us’: mainstream press and citizen journalists jockey for authority over the collective

memory of Hurricane Katrina” Robinson offers a focused look at citizen journalists’ coverage of the first anniversary of Hurricane Katrina (2006) and, via textual analysis, found “This citizen-produced collective memory focused on individual experience and personal connection in a way that asserted the citizen’s right to tell this societal story” (796).

The title of her article suggests this narrow focus, and the inclusion of only anniversary coverage supports that intent, but as a reader with clear familiarity with the event, I never felt I learned about the citizen journalist’s “contrary version of Hurricane Katrina” (Robinson 795). As a journalism and mass communication scholar, her intended audience is perhaps content with the focused discussion on how online writers “have assumed a new agency in the distributed information architecture inherent in the media system” (Robinson 806); however, as a rhetorician and Internet researcher I wanted more. While she offered an excellent rundown of her textual analysis matrix and clear definitions of journalists’ duties and the previous (pre-Katrina) portrayal of citizen journalists’ as passive and with little agency, *New Media and Society* readers (themselves an interdisciplinary and international group), never had the opportunity to learn about **who** these locals were and **why**, in the midst of their loss, they actively went online to document their experience.

It is because I too believe blogs “are now part of the same news production process” (Robinson 796) as mainstream journalists’ work that I feel this study was limited in its focus on A-list bloggers or what Robinson describes as the “four most popular Hurricane Katrina blogs...as identified on Technorati”

(800). Surely the bloggers' emotions and identities as native New Orleanians must come through their frequent postings, especially when documenting the first anniversary of an event that forever changed their lives, but Robinson's analysis never lets readers' "hear" those types of posts. Instead her data emphasizes "ownership" of the Katrina story with 1) mainstream outlets like CNN broadcasting messages such as "we're keeping them honest, looking for progress and talking with people" (Cooper qtd. in Robinson 802) and 2) citizen journalists retaliating against such reporting, pleading, "Please don't be afraid of becoming emotional over a story like this one, the minute you deny your own humanity it is time to quit" (JoAnn qtd. in Robinson 804). Similar to my rationale about local bloggers' mistrust of the media, Robinson deduces "citizens were situating themselves as being...in the 'know' and in possession of the real 'truth'" (804). Yet none of the blogs quoted illustrate the reality or urgency of the Katrina experience, only the dichotomy between the media, traditional and new.

Synthesizing the Studies

From a general exploration into why people blog and how those blogs impact personal communication practices to a specific look at citizen journalists' anniversary coverage of Hurricane Katrina, what these two studies show is that internet researchers are inclined to include some combination of interviews with bloggers and content or textual analysis of blog posts. Given the restricted time frames of these studies, oftentimes only a few months, I believe much more can be done to illustrate how social media tools such as blogs can impact the long

term recovery of a community affected by disaster. And it can be written in a compelling way.

Influenced by both the authenticity of oral histories and the affordances of the blog genre that I detail in Chapter Two and the methods utilized in these research studies, my research project is motivated by the desire to have my readers get to know and remember the people I have interviewed after reading an array of examples that share their histories, pre and post-Katrina. To date, no book-length study has profiled a group of city-specific bloggers like those in New Orleans who continue to document their struggles to rebuild and recover and, in turn, who enhance our understanding of what it means to be part of a democratized media. Given the current trend for the Internet to “overtak[e] other means of knowledge dissemination” in disaster-affected communities (Kile and Mock), my research strives to “examine more features of the communicative situation rather than merely an artifact it produces” (DePew 52), and as such aims to set a “methodological precedent for future inquiries” (DePew 52).

An Autoethnographic Experience

By now it should be obvious given my personal and emotional connection to the topic that studying this population has challenged me to negotiate my role as both researcher and Katrina “survivor.” Because of the option to label my study an autoethnography, however, I have been able to combine story with method and “connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political” (Ellis xix). Carolyn Ellis’s recent book *Revision: Autoethnographic*

Reflections on Life and Work considers such work in a “meta” way, defining autoethnographic approaches as “flexible, reflexive, and reflective of life as lived. . . . Often they are multivoiced and include interaction among researchers and participants in the research context as well as stories participants bring to the project” (16). Combining textual analysis with interview data, my focus has always been to show that my story is not unique, to find others who inherently understand the introspection and emotion with which I write. Therefore, as an autoethnography this dissertation celebrates the strides New Orleanians have made online and, as a result, aims “to expand scholarship about human experience” (Ellis 16) as well as document “not victim tales” but “survivor tales for the writer and for those who read them” (Ellis 17).

Virtual (Auto)Ethnography

I would also argue that blog research dovetails nicely with autoethnographic studies since both push the primary investigator to find new ways of understanding. The interdisciplinary nature of the Internet engages scholars in innovative ways, and learning to approach research subjects and collect data requires new techniques. As the edited collection *Digital Writing Research* contends, “Because of the complexity of researching in digitized spaces...researchers should ‘embrace working across methodological interfaces’, pursuing multiple methodologies while continually engaging in critical, reflexive practices” (Sullivan and Porter qtd. in McKee and DeVoss 17). This text also reminds those of us in the field of computers and writing that “Doing digital

research is not merely a matter of shipping old methods and methodologies to a new research locale” (Porter, “Foreword” xvi), which echoes Carolyn Ellis’s definition of autoethnographic approaches as ones that “do not follow a rigid list of rule-based procedures” (16).

Christine Hine’s principles of *virtual ethnography*—intermittent immersion, acknowledgment of the work as a partial (never total) look, and the foregrounding of reflexive experiences—also support my examination of blog posts and Web 2.0 contributions made by New Orleanians since the storm. And as James Porter’s foreword to *Digital Writing Research* reminds us, “the focus of our field continues to be the activity of **writing**—the act of producing and distributing writing and the ways in which technology assists, promotes, impedes, and/or shapes that process” (xviii, emphasis mine). All of my methodological choices return to this focus on the writing published by New Orleans bloggers, writing that offers a more complete and powerful picture of what happened and continues to happen in their beloved city.

Targeting the Population

Unlike other ethnographers who identify and then visit a culture, you could say that mine (initially) chose me due to the dialectic nature of the blog genre, e.g. comments, blogrolls, trackbacks, and permalinks. In my July 2006 post expressing my surprise that there had been [“A Geek Dinner in NOLA?”](#), I included links to where I had read about it as well as to a description of the dinner, which I remarked sounded “very much like the Friday night dinners at

[BloggerCon.](#)” I closed the post calling out to blogger “Think NOLA” to respond, and he did within a half hour of my posting:

Alan Gutierrez Says:

July 19, 2006, 5:51 p.m.

Hey there Daisy. I’m sorry you missed the event. It was so much fun to have everyone over. Especially since I’m not a good blogger myself, I can only follow the blogs a little bit.

These shouldn’t be hard to organize. We simply need to meet more frequently. Maybe we need to organize ourselves a bit better, so that we know when someone else is in town, etc.

A couple of days later my post received another comment, one that would prove to be invaluable to my future relationship with this blogosphere:

Mark Says:

July 21, 2006, 6:15 a.m.

Hey, you need to drop into Yahoo groups and find BlogNOLA, and subscribe. The delayed wine has arrived, and as a result another one is bound to happen sooner than later.

As Mark instructed, I joined the BlogNOLA listserv (which moved to Google Groups in August 2008) and then added my blog URL to a wiki space²⁷

²⁷ Originally hosted at http://thinknola.com/wiki/List_of_New_Orleans_bloggers, this list of over 300 blogs that contain either “significant content about New Orleans or...about the flood that occurred when the levees broke on August 29, 2005,” is now available at http://risingtidenola.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=7&Itemid=4.

describing itself as “a comprehensive list of New Orleans bloggers.” Finding such a resource was extremely beneficial because not only could I begin reading more of these local voices, I could list their sites on my blogroll, which again increased the conversations in all of our comments’ sections.

For example, after I wrote [a post](#) connecting the writing done by New Orleans bloggers to the most recent Pew Internet and American Life Project report depicting bloggers as [“the internet’s new storytellers.”](#) Mark left another comment prompting me to learn more and eventually participate in the first [Rising Tide conference](#) in August 2006. At that conference I was able to put faces to blog names. I was also honored to be able to speak on a distinguished [panel](#) about the impact of traditional journalists and bloggers during and since Katrina, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Reflecting now on that experience, I realize my face-to-face interaction with everyone at that meeting solidified the trust and interest this group would later have in my dissertation project. After all, other than my blog posts lamenting the loss of my childhood home and my parents’ FEMA and insurance company experiences, I am somewhat of an academic outsider, a transplanted New Orleanian living in Florida who has not had to deal with any of the daily hardships common to their post-Katrina experience. Any of the participants could have at any time simply told me to “go read their blog” rather than communicate to me about what they have written, why, and what it might mean

in the larger sense; however, our shared passion for New Orleans (and technology) overcame any such discrepancies²⁸.

The Wiki Way

The introduction to *Digital Writing Research* delineates issues virtual ethnographers should consider:

- obtaining permissions (or not),
- deciding if material is more like a textual transcript or more like a recorded conversation,
- deciding if material is public or private,
- determining if, where, and to what material the doctrine of fair use applies,
- using technology to “lurk” or disguise one’s true self or to announce one’s presence, and
- choosing to seek IRB approval (or not).

(Gurak and Silker qtd. in McKee and DeVoss 17).

²⁸ On several occasions NOLABlogger listserv members have forwarded on requests they’ve received from student researchers. The reactions to those, especially if the researcher is not a native New Orleanian, have ranged from curmudgeonly to outright hostile: “I wish I had a dollar for every student who in effect I have written papers for. Do him a favor and make him dig a little. Research is hard work” (Gadbois), and “Quite frankly, I’ve seen a lot of half ass products that aren’t worth the paper they are written on, much less my time. How many times can I give my time to students in the hopes that they will create a product that I can use or that will be beneficial to others? Do the time, kids! I wish I had a silver spoon and the time to feed it to you, but then I would be doing you a disadvantage” (Kimball).

These were all matters I carefully considered, although in the interest of transparency, I did feel at an advantage. After all, my presence among this group was originally invited, so I felt no need to lurk. I was also confident in these bloggers' web 2.0 literacy skills; thus, in addition to offering my participants and myself the greatest flexibility when communicating, I chose to conduct my interviews in a wiki space.

Given my participation at the aforementioned Rising Tide conference, which itself was organized in a wiki, I knew that my target population was particularly savvy with wiki collaboration. I also knew from months of participating in listserv discussions that these bloggers were quick to respond to emails, and take to their blogs and cross-post information that resulted from those listserv conversations. Ultimately, I was confident that those who agreed to participate would answer follow-up questions.

Consequently, in February of 2007, I contacted potential participants via the NOLABlogger listserv, reminded them of my participation on the [“Influence of Journalists and Bloggers” panel](#), outlined what my research entailed, and asked that instead of conducting individual interviews that we “all interact on a wiki.” I made them aware that I would be “adding questions and starting the discussion with my own responses”; I also asked that they please “not add to the wiki until [they had] emailed me back with [their] consent” (Pignetti, “NOLA blogger research project”). My email had a casual tone, as I had already openly communicated with this audience for several months, so I added, “Yes, I know blogging and wiki-ing are forms of public writing, and I don’t necessarily need to

ask for your consent, but I would like it because I would never want to take your writing out of context.”²⁹

After receiving permission to quote from over a dozen blogs, with some of the bloggers informally reminding me, “It’s all Creative Commons anyway” (Loki), I then pointed them to a password-protected wiki where we all answered the same twelve interview questions:

1. Where do you currently live? Did Hurricane Katrina affect this current location? Did it affect locations you’ve previously lived in?
2. Are you a New Orleans native? If not, tell me about the connection you feel to the city.
3. When did you start blogging? Why?
4. What do you blog about?
5. Where do you blog?
6. To what extent has Hurricane Katrina impacted your blog writing?
7. Have you ever considered writing in your blog as a form of activism? If so, please link to a post that enacts this type of expression. Tell us a little about the post(s) in addition to giving us the link(s)

²⁹ Obtaining IRB approval was more straightforward than expected because I first obtained permission to quote, initially referred to blog posts recommended by the bloggers themselves, and then included other blog posts I deemed representative of their Katrina narrative. All of this was writing made publicly available by the bloggers themselves and thus classified as “existing data,” which meets the Division of Research Integrity and Compliance’s exempt criteria.

8. Have you ever considered writing in your blog as a form of therapy?
If so, please link to a post that enacts this type of expression. Tell us a little about the post(s) in addition to giving us the link(s)
9. Why would you say you've decided to write in a public forum rather than a private one?
10. While reviewing your blog, do you see any other posts that you find representative of your blog's focus? Or others that have prompted lots of comments? Or others that use images or video to enhance your feelings and opinions of post-Katrina New Orleans? Tell us a little about the post(s) in addition to giving us the link(s).
11. If you use other forms of technology for post-Katrina purposes, please describe those here.
12. Did you participate in [Rising Tide](#)? What did that meeting achieve for you?

Limiting the questions to twelve allowed me to move from biographical information about the informant's relationship to New Orleans to their beginnings as a blogger. Three questions, numbers 7, 8 and 10 specifically, then pushed the participants to reflect upon on their writing and provide links to posts they felt representative of their blog's focus. Relying upon this data-collection method permitted me to contextualize these bloggers' storm *and* public writing experiences.

When discussing "interviews for autoethnography," Heewon Chang lists the following reasons for focusing on such life-focused material: "to stimulate

your memory, to fill gaps in information, to gather new information about you and other relevant topics, to validate your personal data, and to gain others' perspectives on you" (106). Offering my responses as a model for my respondents was intended to establish rapport in this new space as well as gain new points-of-view on how and why New Orleans and Hurricane Katrina were being portrayed in the blogosphere. Connecting blog posts to other texts, digital or otherwise, became essential to conveying the many stories and neighborhoods affected by the disaster and, as you will see in the next chapter, it was a method that self-consciously worked to empower my research participants as well as acknowledge the various political, material, and ethical contexts shaping their writing (McKee and DeVoss 17).

Conducting my interviews within a wiki also created a text-based archive, with everything written up by the participants themselves. Their wiki interactions were mediated asynchronously (with each version saved by nature of the wiki software), which made it easy to collect and complete transcriptions and subsequently to construct the profiles in the next chapter. Coupled with searching through the bloggers' monthly archives for posts that could supplement the ones they listed as representative of their blog writing, this fieldwork practically organized itself.

Conclusion

In the time that has elapsed since Hurricane Katrina, "The Internet remains a crucial link in the effort to rebuild New Orleans and its communities"

(Tisserand). My next chapter offers profiles of bloggers created from the data collected and illustrates the boom in citizen media production from post-Katrina New Orleans. Many of the examples also show how these bloggers' reliance upon technology has evolved. Shortly after the storm their posts focused on reporting eyewitness accounts and now, nearly five years later, the writing has become more passionate, more civically and socially aware, and ultimately more responsible in terms of what it documents.

Chapter Four: Meet the Bloggers

I was in the Big Easy as an invited speaker at a conference of NOLA bloggers called Rising Tide II. In most cities, bloggers practice a peculiar virtual cannibalism, tearing each other apart for sport. But at Rising Tide, among people young and old, black and white, I saw my first glimpse of what can be termed blogger solidarity. It stemmed, as one told me, from "the necessity of coming together after Katrina."

These bloggers represent the best of something beginning to bubble that you won't see on the nightly news... Amid the horror, amid the neighborhoods that the federal government seems content to see die, there are actual people sticking it out. And they do it with gusto.

Dave Zirin, ["In NOLA, spirit of Katrina still lives, but so do people"](#)

Introduction

Anniversary specials, celebrity fundraisers, and now Superbowl XLIV sound bytes attempt to keep the Hurricane Katrina story alive on our television screens, but so many more stories of post-Katrina New Orleans are available online in the hundreds of locally authored blogs that began in the Fall of 2005 and continue to be updated on an ongoing basis. From any of the 300+ blogs aggregated on the Rising Tide [website](#), audiences can read more authentic, longitudinal narratives detailing the processes of recovery.

As Chapter Three established, my interviewees are all New Orleanians who decisively "allowed" the Internet in their lives after Hurricane Katrina. Many have strong familial roots in New Orleans; some refer to themselves as

“naturalized New Orleanians;” but all have chosen to persevere. Referencing the web postings shared daily by these *networked citizens*, this chapter illustrates the facility those with Internet access have to “remember, testify, and reorganize” just as they are “reiterating and striving to repair or readjust” (Gilbert 87). The work of these bloggers, who have no qualms about sharing their personal stories of evacuation, relocation, return, and subsequent frustration with living in post-Katrina New Orleans, thus demonstrates how “the effort to write (record) and right (rectify) wrong involves both fear and ferocity” (Gilbert 87). Using technology to forge new, physical connections across neighborhoods, it becomes quite clear that their mission is to build of a national consciousness of Hurricane Katrina through online communication and public discourse.

Debunking Stereotypes

For those who have never visited New Orleans and only recognize it from stereotypical images of Bourbon Street antics, Mardi Gras parades, and (since Hurricane Katrina) neighborhoods submerged by flood waters, I refer to this description of its “fiercely proud and independent” people:

We dance even if there’s no radio. We drink at funerals. We talk too much and laugh too loud and live too large and, frankly, we’re suspicious of others who don’t.

But we’ll try not to judge you while we’re in your town.

Everybody loves their home, we know that. But we love South Louisiana with a ferocity that borders on the pathological...

The only way you could understand that is if you have been there, and so many of you have. So you realize that when you strip away all the craziness and bars and parades and music and architecture and all that hooley, really, the best thing about where we come from is us.

We are what made this place a national treasure. We're good people. And don't be afraid to ask us how to pronounce our names. It happens all the time.

When you meet us now and you look into our eyes, you will see the saddest story ever told. Our hearts are broken into a thousand pieces.

But don't pity us. We're gonna make it. We're resilient. (Rose 2-3)

Newspaper columnist Chris Rose wrote this "Who We Are" essay as an open letter to America, specifically the many places across the United States who took in evacuees. He portrays the displaced Katrina survivors of early September 2005 as people who have "arrived on your doorstep on short notice" but still determined to "move back home...[and] repay to you the hospitality and generosity of spirit you offer to us in this season of our despair" (Rose 3). The bloggers you meet in this chapter did move back to New Orleans; however, the examples provided for each will reveal the extent to which their resilient personalities were tested by the daily trials and tribulations associated with recovery.

Profile Progression

Critic of web 2.0 technologies, Andrew Keen, argues, “When everyone claims to be an author, there can be no art, no reliable information.” Yet, the three bloggers I have chosen to profile admit to writing for an expanded audience since the storm and acknowledging the responsibility that comes with that authorship. Building upon the experience of Charlotte, whose writing reveals the emotions of a woman working through her survivor’s guilt, and Maitri, whose information sharing allows her defend the city to those misinformed, this chapter culminates with an extended look at Morwen whose blog *Gentilly Girl* most exemplifies a move toward empowerment. By examining their blogs in this way, I hope readers will come away with a better understanding of the range of neighborhoods that fell victim to the levee breaches, a greater sense of how definitions of citizenship evolve after a national tragedy, and a keener understanding of how these New Orleanians are “highly motivated to come up with ways to make sense of a world richer and more interesting than the constrained resources of the traditional media let on” (Keen and Weinberger).

Charlotte at [Traveling Mermaid](#)

Charlotte moved to New Orleans in 1978 when her husband got a job with Chevron, USA, and in our wiki-based interview³⁰ declared herself to be a

³⁰ Similar to how I cited the oral history narrators featured in Chapter Two, for readability sake everything quoted in these three bloggers’ profiles that is not explicitly labeled a blog post has come from their interview responses to the twelve questions asked in the password-protected [“NOLA Bloggers Wiki.”](#)

“naturalized New Orleanian” who believed it was her “destiny to live here.” In her words: “This city just gets into your heart and soul.”

Having lived in the same house in Algiers³¹ since 1980, she was lucky to not have any flooding as a result of Hurricane Katrina. The damage in that neighborhood was primarily wind-related, and while a very old tree in her front yard was up-rooted, it, fortunately, fell into the street, narrowly missing her neighbor’s house. Her husband returned to Algiers the Sunday following the storm to see this and to find the roof and part of the siding on her house damaged while Charlotte stayed in Jackson, Mississippi, at her sister-in-law’s home until the first of October.

She describes her information-seeking experience during this time as follows:

We were glued to WWL radio and to the internet where I found Polimom’s blog³². She had contacts in Algiers who stayed and passed along information as she received it. It was really frustrating because other than Polimom there was no news coming out of Algiers. We went to Google maps and found our house which looked OK so that gave us some comfort.

³¹ In a blog post Charlotte describes her neighborhood as follows: “Algiers is in Orleans Parish on the westbank of the Mississippi River across from Canal Street and the French Quarter. We often refer to ourselves as ‘the red-headed step-child’ because some New Orleanians think we’re not really part of New Orleans because of the bad ole bridge over da river and other Westbank communities think we’re part of bad ole Orleans Parish” ([“Algiers, LA Post-G”](#)).

³² As of February 2006, Polimom’s [“Katrina Forums,”](#) which featured posts that primarily served the Algiers communities, were labeled as being for “archival / reference purposes. All interactive functionality has been disabled.”

Relying on such web-based sources, Charlotte felt “lucky to be [evacuated] where [she] had internet access.” Much like my own experience, she “was glued to the computer scouring for REAL information about what was happening in Nola.” Different, though, is that I already had a blogging history while Charlotte had only used email and message lists to keep in touch before the storm hit. Consequently, she “began blogging in November of 2005 as a result of discovering the blogging world while in exile after Katrina.”

Describing her blog as a personal journal, she says she writes about whatever she’s interested in, “culture, music, environment, spirituality, philosophy...” but it always comes back to Hurricane Katrina:

Before Katrina, I wasn’t at all community or politically active. What has happened here has lit a fire in me...I want the rest of the country to know what has happened, the failure of our elected officials, the struggle of the people who chose to live here, the impact we are making be it a slow one. I don’t think I’ve ever seen the fervor for a city like I’ve seen it here. Honestly, I cannot believe how it has changed me.

Having reviewed various blog posts she deemed representative of this fervor, I notice the change in herself she describes above to come through palpably when she uses her blog to work out feelings about what has happened to the city she loves.

This first example, entitled [“An Open Letter to Katrina,”](#) is from a day Charlotte “was feeling extremely sad and hopeless about Nola”:

December 6, 2005

Katrina,

Why won't you leave us alone? You continue to follow us, a shadowy spectre hovering, waiting for a vulnerable moment to stab us in the back yet again. Isn't it enough that you killed thousands, tore families apart and decimated homes and livelihoods? Here we are almost 4 months later and you still dog us. Every time we begin to feel a little hopeful, get a little bit of good news - WHAM! There you are! There you are in an uncaring government and a bored, cynical public. There you are in the faces of friends who are living in their trashed houses with no furniture, sleeping on the floor because your floodwaters destroyed everything. Living in a shell of a house because they have no money and no jobs because their employers closed down the office and gave up without even trying. There you are in the empty schools waiting for children and struggling small businesses waiting for customers. There you are in the desecrated and storm ravaged cemeteries where the dead's peaceful sleep was snatched in your teeth. There you are every time another body is found in what was once a home, buried under the muck and trash. **(Yes, they're still being found.)** There you are in the psyche of those in the long pharmacy lines waiting for their bottles of anti-depressants. And finally, there you are in the obituaries of the **post-Katrina suicides**. What will it take to make

you go away for good? Are you wishing for the heart and soul of New Orleans to shrivel up and disappear like so many of her neighborhoods, before you're happy? Today for the first time I'm starting to think you'll get that wish. Katrina. God, I wish I could have one day that I didn't hear, read or think your name!

Cathy Caruth defines trauma as “the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena” (*Unclaimed Experience* 91), and this post written a little over three months after the storm illustrates Charlotte’s first use of her blog to personify Katrina and to record those moments.

Within two hours of posting, she received comments from the aforementioned Polimom, and they began a dialogue that emphasized the benefits of expressing those feelings:

[Polimom](#) said...

Oh no, Mermaid. Not a chance Katrina will "get that wish." Cuz we're not giving up. None of us! Katrina can't take away hearts and souls unless we let her.

[TravelingMermaid](#) said...

I know you're right, Polimom. I just had to vent my frustration after talking to a friend I hadn't seen since the storm who is sleeping on the floor, another friend whose mamma's coffin is missing from her

tomb, and then reading about the bodies just found. . . . It's just all too much.

Central to trauma studies is the idea that, as Cathy Caruth describes it, a trauma can possess us for our lifetime. Sharing it with others and writing it down may be the only means of making some sense of it and, intentionally or unintentionally, may help others in similar situations realize that they are not alone. A comment posted by “dangle24-7” two months after her original post indicates Charlotte’s words continued to make an impression: “It’s funny, but after reading this, I feel closer to you than [SIC] before. You can take the ‘Ugly’ and expose it gracefully.” Had this just been a personal diary where the feelings were only privately captured and not publicly processed, the impact would be significantly less.

Charlotte’s emotions often escalate when hurricane season begins. In May of 2006, she describes New Orleans as [“THE ZOMBIE ZONE.”](#) and her blog post features the following poignant text:

I wake up Wednesday morning and it's 81 degrees with 79% humidity at 6:00 am.

The air is as heavy as a sumo wrestler.

My head and ears hurt and I feel like I have a stake driven up my nose, through my eye and into my head.

Can sinuses be removed? Or transplanted?

A feeling of suffocation settles over me like a black cloak with the hood over my face.

This is not May weather. This is the dreaded-month-of-August

weather.

This is smack-dab-in-the-middle-of-hurricane-season weather.

Or am I feeling paranoid?

All I know is.....it reminds me of [HER](#).

And I'm tired of HER.....so tired.

Offering her readers a lengthy “I’m tired of...” list full of sensory details about the reality of post-Katrina New Orleans, she ultimately closes her post by sharing a visualization exercise that helps her calm down when her “mind is running like a hamster on a wheel”:

I visualize a [brick wall](#) of row after row of identical red bricks with no chinks. An impenetrable wall that stops worrisome thoughts cold.

It works when I concentrate.

If only I could stop the dreams.

And the guilt of feeling this way when so many lost so much.

If you recall, her house suffered little damage compared to others, but the overwhelming survivor’s guilt she describes here attests to the Katrina experience being all-consuming. While **everyone** in New Orleans has the date of August 29, 2005, to mark the life-altering event, the identification of each and everyone’s trauma is not such a straightforward task—there are no visible cues or scars—which further justifies the tendency for individuals like Charlotte to experience a belated reaction such as this one.

Furthermore, this writing has a purpose beyond venting. Charlotte herself admits in her interview responses that blogging lets “the rest of the country know

we are still not ok down here.” One never knows the reach of their online activity until they receive comments, though, and [“THE ZOMBIE ZONE”](#) post received eleven reactions, some from fellow New Orleanians for whom it is easy to empathize, as seen in another comment from “dangle24-7”:

It’s just not you Mermaid; it’s me and most of us. And if you live down here and it “Isn’t you”, then it’s you with the problem, not me nor Mermaid.

But Mermaid, I have no answers. I am so mentally exhausted I don’t even have freakin’ questions anymore; this is why my blog lays dormant.

Me falling off the blogger’s radar though is no biggy; but not you Mermaid. You offer so much soothing and contrast of what we (and you) are dealing with but you also manage to get in that well made point about our conditions.

As a matter of fact, you may have just written the quintessential blog of what I have tried to say for six months.

To everyone, this is a day in our lives. Thank you Mermaid for spelling it out for everyone. Just don’t build that brick wall completely around yourself.

After “dangle24-7’s” remarks, eight more came in, both directed at Charlotte’s original post and “dangle’s” comment. Among these were several from “outsiders” or non-natives who let Charlotte know that they read her blog on a daily basis, sympathized with what she has “suffered and continue[s] to deal with

everyday” (miyankee), and urged “dangle24-7” to “keep pounding the keyboard” (Marco).

Charlotte’s turn to the web demonstrates she trusted sharing her experiences with an audience, albeit an invisible, world-wide one. The communication may have been asynchronous, but it being online and fully accessible makes its reach wider than that of an email, which is the medium Charlotte had previously relied on. Moreover, using the comments section to motivate one other to keep blogging about Katrina, even those posts that Charlotte later described as representative of her “end-of-my-ropeness,” is what public writing is all about, as stated so eloquently in “Sophmom’s” comment:

A blog is whatever you want it to be. You don't have to post every day or even have something important to say every time you post. Even if it lies there with nothing newly written for weeks or even months, new people wander in and read for the first time what was to you, old news. It is a connective link in a virtual chain, an important part of telling the story to those who are not there.

Maureen Murdock, psychotherapist and author of *Unreliable Truth: On Memoir and Memory*, asserts, “It is the act of writing rather than the writing itself that provides an opportunity to heal” (76), and as Sophmom suggests, by posting her thoughts in such an open space, Charlotte can be comforted by the fact that she has archived a moment that she can instantly read and later return to reflect upon, or not.

Moreover, by using her blog to record what she has experienced during subsequent hurricane evacuations, readers can see how Charlotte has come to terms with [“The Dreaded E-word.”](#) In a 2009 post by the same name she admits she still finds it to be an “emotionally draining,” “horrific,” and “difficult” experience, but since Katrina, “most New Orleanians have a plan.” Nowadays, too, Charlotte’s evacuation plans include her familiarity with the New Orleans blogosphere as well as communicating via status update or “tweet.” Details from her 2008 Hurricane Gustav evacuation are available in her blog posts labeled [“My Gustav Diary”](#) and emphasize this newfound appreciation of microblogging:

[“In a Holding Pattern”](#)

September 2, 2008

Twitter has been wonderful for keeping up with what’s happening in the city and with friends scattered all over the southeast. Some of our Nola Bloggers have been interviewed by media, I understand. Maitri with BBC, Mark of Toulouse Street by somebody, Ray in New Orleans mentioned at Boing-Boing. Sorry no links and not even sure of details. I’m having trouble with internet connection here. Can see email on my Google page but can’t actually open the mail. Really needing to hear from friends. Can’t seem to settle down long enough to do any reading longer than a tweet. Seriously wanting an ice cold beer in a tee-totaler household. Eh. Can someone tweet me one?

Again referencing Murdock's work: "It is true that we never know exactly what heals a person, but the greatest healing may come in knowing that from our suffering we have comfort to offer each other and that we are not, in fact, alone" (81-82). I would argue that Charlotte, having admitted to starting her blog as a result of the unnatural disaster of Hurricane Katrina, unconsciously did so to become part of a community like the NOLA Bloggers. Having had four years to learn about the reach of public forums, Charlotte is fully aware that she is not alone, and her multi-tasking behaviors—checking email, blogging, and microblogging³³ even when the Internet connection is not reliable—demonstrate her increased dependence upon the Internet for keeping in touch with friends and reporting what she knows.

Maitri at [VatulBlog](#)

Given a choice between Houston and New Orleans, Maitri moved to New Orleans in early 2003 to work for Shell Oil Company. On her blog's "About" or "Who Is Maitri?" page, she offers a quirky biography: "Made in Kuwait of Indian parts, I have lived in the Middle East, Champaign-Urbana, IL, Madison, WI, and

³³ According to the article "[Networking through Disaster](#)," "Citizens' emergency response to Hurricane Gustav, which hit New Orleans in August 2008, surpassed their response to Katrina due to the advent of Twitter feeds. Williams attributes his timely escape from the city during Gustav largely to live Twitter updates from those in New Orleans who announced which roads were closed and which streets were flooded or blocked by debris" (Politzer). This essay was featured in a special issue of *Local Knowledge*, a publication of the Mercatus Center at George Mason University, which describes itself as "a 501(c)(3) education, research, and outreach organization that works with scholars, policy experts, and government officials to bridge academic learning and real-world practice" ("[About: Local Knowledge](#)").

New Orleans, LA.” More seriously, her interview responses revealed, “New Orleans is the only place in America that my multi-cultural background is validated and makes the most sense.”

Her background is in geoscience, mapping, 3D visualization, and application development, thereby making her understanding and use of technology, and of utmost interest to this dissertation, social media, obvious. It was after moving to New Orleans that she began blogging, although she disclosed that she began “spewing missives” ever since she could write. She shared that her favorite pastime during high school and college classes was writing essays on anything she found thought-provoking at the time and emailing them to a list of politically- and socially-motivated friends. In the late 1990s, she created her first website and put up the aforementioned essays as static HTML pages, and then “some time in 2003, after moving to New Orleans, caught the Blogger bug.”

Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent flooding did not affect her home in the Lower Garden District; she had some roof damage, but it was minimal compared to what the rest of the city went through.³⁴ Still, she is vehement when she states that Katrina is the reason that she “gave her blog over to citizen journalism on New Orleans” in 2005. In her own words:

³⁴ A sign of how erratic the wind and water damage was all over the city, during our interview in 2007 Maitri was quick to mention “as a reality check” that her next-door neighbor was finally getting his FEMA tarp replaced with a real roof, reminding me that it was 18 months after the storm.

VatulBlog has become a lot less self-indulgent since the flood. Providing daily updates from and for the Crescent City turned this outlet into more of citizen journalism and less random musings. My writing is relatively more polished and directed at a larger audience, one that has grown in leaps and bounds since the flood. Once readership has grown to this extent, you are obligated to delivering a relevant and readable product almost everyday, lest they lose interest in what is probably the biggest problem facing America today. If I've made at least one person think about or face the realities of New Orleans, then I've been responsible towards my community and to myself.

One noticeable way that she marks this shift and recognition of a wider audience is through her numbering her blog posts according to the days since Hurricane Katrina. Even those with seemingly unrelated topics, e.g. science, the public domain (she is a member of Project Gutenberg), or "government boondoggles," all posts between August 29, 2005, which she described as "the first day of exile," and March 26, 2009, when she moved to Ohio to care for ailing family members, are numbered this way, reminding her readers that everything in her life during that time was inextricably linked to her living in a city of recovery.

Like any Katrina blogger, her posts are understandably emotional when it comes to defending New Orleans. As she revealed in our interview, "When I first started blogging about New Orleans after August 29th, it was all I could do to keep from going insane." This first example, one she chose as representative of

her writing, exemplifies those feelings of desperation, although it is far from unmediated stream of consciousness. It repeatedly proclaims to an outside audience, “We Are Not OK,” a phrase that would later become a category name for many Katrina-related posts:

[“Day 219: We Are Not Ok”](#)

April 4, 2006

Talking about a fire here, another business re-opening or closing there and instances of post-Katrina life in New Orleans has its place. Yet, today, I feel that prepared posts on Charity Hospital and the Tennessee Williams Festival belie my true emotions and intent as a writer for this city. Of what use is telling all of you that the Mid-City Juan’s Flying Burrito is opening its doors once again or that a friend’s Lakeview home is due for demolition when you have no context for it or the memories and hope that convey with it?

What you need to know is the solemn truth about New Orleans.

We Are Not Ok

Labeling herself as “a writer for this city” early on in the post is important to note as the next section of this post shows her familiarity with the place, the people, and the customs that make New Orleans unique and “worth saving”:

When I walk the streets of my Lower Garden District neighborhood, with my hands running over ancient wrought iron gates surrounding beautiful old homes and inhaling the sweet perfume of night-blooming jasmine, I know. When I strike up a conversation with a

stranger on the street or in the elevator about anything from what we did over the weekend to the right place to buy specialty foods, I know. When I walk by a brass band playing outside K-Paul's, tip them a dollar and receive a wide smile in return, I know. When I think about the friends, music and food I will run across at French Quarter Festival and Jazzfest in the next month, I know. When I look out over the French Quarter and the Marigny from my 33rd-floor vantage point and can identify every street into the distance, I know. When I see someone familiar everyday and say hello, I know. When I take in the amount of time and globe-spanning history and the number of multi-hued and multi-talented people that have gone into creating this old city "preserved by decay," I know. I know that there is no other place like this.

America needs New Orleans. The world needs New Orleans.

All of this could vanish. Again. And only a few care? We Are Not Ok

This post continues with links to web-based articles related to levee restoration and the increasing cost of storm aid. Its final plea, "Stay with us, America, help us. This is your fight, too. Please help spread the word that We Are Not Ok," exemplifies how many NOLA bloggers cannot separate their emotional posts from activist ones.

When directly asked about blogging as forms of therapy and activism, Maitri stated each of her posts are "an exercise in parsing the details and presenting something that made sense to me and calmed me down first and the

rest of the world second.” Maitri acknowledged that she knew she “may only be able to reach one or two people through [her] writing,” but if her blogging “provides information for making choices, more power to it.” A post representative of the opinions above is the following:

[“Day 338: Inspiration”](#)

August 1, 2006

New Orleans is my home and it is a mark of responsible citizenship to participate in as many activities as possible that will make one’s city better. This is not socialism or altruism - if you help make your surroundings better, you end up living in that much better of a place...

For better or for worse, as an American and a global citizen, I love New Orleans and want to see her potential bloom into an exemplary reality. This place is only a lost cause or a cesspool if we want it to be. So, we all do our parts.

Given her experience as an oil-industry geologist and geophysicist and current job with a growing geospatial and engineering services company, one of the most unique ways Maitri “does her part” is by linking to and providing extensive commentary on maps and 3D data. In her post [“Day 555: One Football Field Every 45 Minutes”](#) she links to *The Times-Picayune’s* 7-minute animation [“The Rise and Disappearance of Southeast Louisiana”](#) which “offers a quick insight into what southeast Louisiana and the Gulf Coast face in levees and years to come.” Her post opens with a quote from its narrator Dan Swenson,

“Louisiana is currently losing approximately 24 square miles of wetlands per year, which is roughly one football field every 45 minutes,” and then offers her remarks:

Think about it like this: During the course of one Saints football game, Louisiana may conservatively estimate a loss of four equivalent Superdome greens around us.

Addendum: This isn't to say that deposition (land buildup) does not occur along SE Louisiana's coast. With the loss to date, continued industry and development interest in the area, sea level rise and continued hurricane activity, how do we mitigate land loss?

Ending with a question underscores her expert consideration, concern for this issue as well as her acute awareness of audience. Coastal erosion is too often overlooked in discussions of rebuilding the levees that protect the low-lying areas of the city, so Maitri's linking to Swenson's full report offers readers the opportunity to learn more about why it is an important question to answer.

The natural and man-made disaster of Hurricane Katrina is not the only one Maitri has discussed on her blog with this expertise, as seen in a February 2010 post on [“Tsunamis, Floods, Earthquakes, and Systems Scientists.”](#) In it she references a map, this time of Haiti, to show how “much of the island nation is susceptible to landslides.” She then goes on to synthesize this information with that of other reports on disasters in order to argue that scientific labs and academic and political ivory towers need to “work together or bust”:

A structural geology and geophysics nerd, I was initially more enamored with and engrossed in the earthquake's ground motion numbers, which were fed into predicting building failure, than ground sliding. Thankfully, the Katrina levee failures have led me to a more holistic view of disasters. To come up with solutions, we do need subject matter experts, but it is crucial that the general scientific attitude is less "I'll take the seismic stuff, you take the soil stuff and let's not be bothered by policy which is for suits in Washington" and more interdisciplinary cooperation in the name of scientific progress and human betterment. Never will I sift through sediments or poke at fossils, but I'll be damned if I ever view a problem through the blinders of specialization again. At some point, we have to grow up as scientists and citizens and want to incorporate other research as well as demand and follow through on change implementation.

She supports her push for "interdisciplinary cooperation" by linking or "sourcing" from work outside of [her] expertise:

1) **Disasters aren't things that happen to other people, parts of which you later study for academic purposes.** The paper *Katrina's unique splay deposits in a New Orleans neighborhood* by Tulane University's Stephen Nelson et al. documents some fascinating patterns of deposition of canal sediment in the Gentilly neighborhood, which ultimately show WHY the levee there failed as

it did (pilings driven into ground all wrong due to poor sampling of and little care for the subsurface).

2) Disasters are normally compounded by other disasters.

These things rarely happen in isolation. Landslides and floods triggered by earthquakes (and Atlantic hurricanes) are worsened by deforestation for charcoal in a job-starved and subsequently energy-starved country. The need for aid and housing now is appreciated, but what of the larger problems of disappearing trees and moving coastlines?

3) “If the disasters themselves are not preventable, sometimes the way we handle the aftermath is,” says Adele Barker in

Disaster’s Aftermath. Ms. Barker speaks of aid agencies not being prepared in the wake of Haiti and how it reminds her of botched aid following the Southeast Asian tsunami (which in turn puts me in mind of our own New Orleanian disaster after the disaster).

Sometimes, the way we handle the scientific aftermath is preventable, too.

At the end of this post she admits her “immense joy in science as an end in itself” but still promotes this outside learning because “It makes you better. More human. [And] In the end, isn’t that the point of science?” Her linking exemplifies her argument because, as Jill Walker discusses in her essay, “Links and Power,” “the economy of links is not product oriented. It is service oriented, and the service is the link. The link is an action rather than an item; an event, rather than

a metaphor.” This post also reinforces her interview statements about activism as more than talking, as “being/doing,” taking the extra step to “emulate those words in our daily lives and work hard for what we believe in.”

Maitri’s passion is most evident when defending the city of New Orleans. Her post [“Day 368: Why Don’t You Quietly Rebuild And Get On With Your Lives?”](#) discusses the passing of the first anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, lists what the city still needs (“a rebuilding plan, disaster insurance relief, city sanitation workers, affordable housing and small business impetus”), then responds to comment left on a previous post:

Someone named ‘jh’ commented on [my recent Sepia Mutiny post](#):

“I don’t hear Mississippi whining. Why can’t people just quietly rebuild and get on with their lives? They’ve gotten ridiculous sums of money to rebuild that city ...”

While I didn’t bother feeding the troll there, I realize the staggering misconceptions people still (want to) have about New Orleans and address them, in the simplest possible terms, in order of receipt.

She goes on to list six items, with full explanations of each and links to supplemental resources, but for my purposes I will concentrate on the most pertinent descriptions of each:

1. Whino Forever: We are tax-paying Americans who produce a quarter of the nation’s domestic oil supply and a fifth of its natural gas – we’ve earned the right to whine. Therefore, I repeat this one last time to your sensibility-lacking, almost-49-star-flag-waving,

supposedly-patriotic self: The New Orleans Katrina experience is a different one altogether. It was an unnatural disaster (levee breaks) and resulting flood that almost destroyed a large portion of the city, while a natural disaster and winds badly thrashed towns like Biloxi and the rest of the MS-AL Gulf Coast. Even residents of those coastal towns admit that our city has it worse than theirs. The story here is that of a broken social contract (and the lack of *any* accountability); yonder, it is one of rebuilding when and how. Simply put, we have a much more complicated mess here than the other areas you mention.

2. No Money, Mo' Problems: We broke, and can't "quietly rebuild" because our city is bankrupt and needs a cold, hard infusion of cash.

3. Show Me The Money: The entire Gulf Coast affected by Hurricane Katrina and her wake, not just New Orleans, has been allocated \$110 billion, of which we have been doled out \$44 billion.

4. What's The Plan, Stan? Federal funds for rebuilding will not be released to us sans a blessed plan.

5. Mean Ol' Levees: All of the above is background chatter without federal levees that don't break. The mouse in my pocket and I would "quietly rebuild" with glee if we had the wherewithal, and our entire region isn't at the mercy of the Army Corps of Engineers for this tremendous engineering task.

6. The Gettin' Ain't So Good: Many New Orleanians, whether here or displaced, are yet to rebuild a life to get on with. If you were to live in a trailer or with family and friends [and] are un(der)employed, fight insurance companies and try to make life as normal as possible for your family and yourself everyday, I wouldn't consider it "going on." That's simple survival.

She closes this post asking a direct question to her intended audience, "Anything else?" and then expresses herself in light of her larger audience, "It's a pity that, in this age of technology, global business and rapid monetary exchange, Louisiana has to justify itself to the rest of the nation. Yet, we abide."

Like Maitri, many New Orleanians are still traumatized by their loss, and even more frustrated by the fact that the majority of Americans still think of the flooding of New Orleans as a natural disaster. But like Charlotte, Maitri knows she has her blog space to merge her opinions with primary sources. She also recognizes she is part of a unique blogging community in New Orleans, one that is "a breed apart, especially when the survival of our city is at stake...We own the material, we gain and grant each other access, we tell the story because it requires telling and we act based on need" ("[Day 507: An Elite Tier Of Bloggers](#)"). Her belief that "Blogging isn't just about talking, it's about a conversation, learning more and creating relationships" has been echoed by many of my interviewees. One who is not profiled in this chapter, Leigh C. who goes by the handle "liprap" and blogs at [Liprap's Lament-The Line](#), described it best in a comment she left as a response to my essay "[Computers and Writing:](#)

Lessons in Literacy from the New Orleans Blogosphere and the Composition

Classroom”:

Unless one is right in the middle of what we write about and discuss, it can be hard to understand it all and very easy to push it aside as little more than personal rantings.

What keeps us going, however, are some primary things the rest of what I call the NOLA blogpocheh have taught me very, very well: that sources must be quoted when necessary, that the rants have much more impact when based on fact, and that a network under the right sort of circumstances is a priceless thing. We have initially been bound together through disaster - but ultimately, we are building something that has the potential to last longer than the levees that were meant to protect us and the wetlands that are this state’s lifeblood and are of great significance to the rest of this country, whether they know it or not.

Leigh’s point that “the rants have much more impact when based on fact” has been especially evident in this review of Maitri’s posts; however, it also provides an appropriate segue into my third and final blogger profile. In the pages that follow, you will see the degree to which everything about Morwen’s writing exemplifies how she, as both a Transsexual and Katrina victim, is hyper-aware of what it takes to be accepted and the will she needs to move forward. Indeed, “the Bloggers, New Orleans and the Queer community” have become her family, or as she describes them, “the reason to continue” ([“The Chain...”](#)).

Morwen at [Gentilly Girl](#)

Born there in 1957, Morwen is a proud New Orleanian whose “people have been [t]here since the beginning of the city.” She moved away in 1965 to live in nearby Biloxi and then Pascagoula, Mississippi, before she “wandered the world” with the Navy. She did not move back to New Orleans until 2002 but “really missed this city whilst away.” Having previously maintained a website and many e-lists for the Transsexual community, it was only “Post-Flood” that she started her first blog, *Gentilly Girl*, “in order to get info out to folks in NOLA, and voice my concerns.”

Interestingly, she incorporates that prior web experience to widen her focus from Trans and Progressive issues to encompass the issues that concern New Orleans. She states, “It’s part of my work to prove that Trans folks are just like any others, to teach folks what we are and what we are not. The Flood caused me to use the same microscope I use for Trans info to the needs at hand here in NOLA.” She also admits, “Everything I have ever done is political in Nature. Been at it for over 35 years, but only the last 7 years has been on a ‘puter.”

Upon my first review of [the long list of NOLA Bloggers](#), I was immediately drawn to *Gentilly Girl* because of my being born and raised in the Gentilly neighborhood. Morwen, like my parents, lost her home to the London Avenue Canal levee breach, but she is the only one of the bloggers profiled here to go on to rebuild on the existing foundation. When describing how the initial surge of water from the Mirabeau break on the London Canal sent 7 feet of water into her

property, she is quick to point out her house is **not** in a designated Flood Zone. Left with nearly two feet of water inside their raised home, she and her partner Betts moved to an apartment in the New Marigny neighborhood and began planning the long process of repairs.

Although most of her Trans New Orleans “cyberworld [was] shut down post-Flood,” the new *Gentilly Girl* blog space allows her to document “the conditions of the city and the government’s response to the Flood.” Her passion for going public is clear when she states, “We are a Social species, and we need to tell our stories, especially when someone has a greater tale of woe than ours.” While she admits “very few folks respond” to her posts, she continues to write to make sure her “words are actually recorded.” Indeed, many of her posts are like Charlotte’s and Maitri’s, pleading for her audience to understand what everyday life is like in post-Katrina New Orleans. For example, in [“Why Must We Fight This Nightmare Every Day?”](#) she cries out:

We gave willingly as dutiful citizens, but then there came a storm in August, 2005. Our protections against such storms, promised by the same Nation that was destroying our lands, freakin’ damned FAILED, AND MANY OF US DIED OR BECAME HOMELESS. Our world, our little part of it, almost died. Many voices called for our death, but we would not hear them. We are rebuilding OUR land. Our place almost died. Can you understand that statement? Look around what you perceive as your community being totally gone. Can you stomach that? That your friends, neighbors, shops and

eateries are wiped from the face of the Earth? To know that the faces you have known for years are no longer next door or around the corner? To realize that the children (who you hated because of their pranks and noise), are no longer in the place their parents lived in? That they aren't there to remind you of the continuity of culture? That you are no longer a part of the Dance of Life? Can you imagine that in the place where you live?
Can you?

The date of this post, July of 2007, is significant because in retelling the tale, she reveals that she is “‘still at the same subject,’ still engaged in the same fearful and fierce activity—writing and seeking to right a mortal wrong” (Gilbert 86-87). Asking this series of questions of her audience illustrates Morwen's ferocity, as does her constant reference to Hurricane Katrina as the “Federal Flood.” This word choice reinforces the fact that it was a man-made disaster rather than a natural one, and prompts her blog readers to recall that it was not the storm's 125 mph winds but the numerous breaches in the federally built levees that caused the flooding that left eighty percent of the city under water.

Therefore, my primary focus into Morwen's blog is how she emotionally documents rebuilding her home, which began thirteen months after the storm hit and the levees broke:

September 20, 2006

[“The Day of Reckoning...”](#)

On Sunday friends came over to clean out our house and start the gutting process. It was so wonderful to have the gang there helping us and try to keep me sane. I guess I got a little sicker than expected to, but I seem to be perking up now. My depression has still not lifted since Sunday evening though.

Late last night I woke up crying and shaking. I'm still shaking today. Part of me wants to scream and shout about the Deluge and how many lives were damaged. So many of us got screwed big time when the levees broke. So many are still not home. Hell! We aren't even home per se.

The idea of "home" is a continuous point of contention in her posts tagged "our house" and "rebuilding." She even ends the post excerpted above by saying, "I can't wait to get back into our home so I can rest," implying that nowhere else could provide her with the "peace" she needs.

Regrettably, it would be "3 years and 1 day from the day [she] evacuated due to Katrina" ("[Good Bye 2008...](#)") before she moved back into her home, but little signs of recovery gave her hope along the way:

["Phone Books!"](#)

February 12, 2007

Yo Baby, Yo Baby, Yo Baby!!!!

For the first time in almost 18 months, we have phone books again. I just about died when I saw them on our steps today. I handed my landlord his set in its yellow bag, and [he] was going to throw the

things away thinking it was trash. I said, “Baby, those are new phone books”, and he snatched them away from the trash can.

(Guess it’s been so long since we had them that some of us forgot what they are!)

Another tiny, but meaningful step in the rebuilding here.

This moment with her landlord was small but significant and representative of the information she would continue to share with her readers. It genuinely captures her life as a local who is eager to be back in the neighborhood where she belongs.

Perhaps most beneficial to her audience, though, was the information she would share about obtaining government assistance monies:

[“ChatUsHome Alert!: By Nov. 6– chance to get reform of FEMA elevation allowances for Louisiana homeowners”](#)

November 4, 2007

We were awarded an ICC Grant for mitigation of our dangers by us raising the house to above the Base Flood Elevation and in accordance with the newest flood depth maps provided by the ACOE two months ago, but FEMA had to consider a way to allow those of us who have already done the necessary work to be reimbursed for work done prior to their October announcement.

FEMA is now in the process of amending it’s [SIC] procedures and policy since the situation down here has taken too long and many of us decided that we didn’t wish to hang out and wait for the funds

to be disbursed. We decided to work on our homes and do the right thing. We are rebuilding NOW.

Offering links to [FEMA's upcoming procedural changes](#), she encourages her audience to learn more about the Citizens' Road Home Action Team (CHAT) and "send their message to the Feds by Nov. 6th". As she writes,

This is vital to folks' rebuilding efforts. Many people here in New Orleans, with the promise of these Grants have moved forward on getting back into our homes and businesses, but unless some of the rules are changed, we will never see those monies. If the latter proves to be the case, those of us who showed initiative in rebuilding will be shorted many dollars that were promised to us all because of forgotten procedural rules on the part of the Federal Government's part.

Her insight into the bureaucratic side of the rebuilding process presents outside audiences (as well as locals like Charlotte and Maitri whose homes did not suffer flood damage) new details about the unnatural disaster's impact.

Because of FEMA involvement, this goes well beyond a home improvement construction project, although Morwen delights in sharing those details too:

["New Kitchen Cabinets"](#)

November 7, 2007

As promised, here is the [East wall](#) diagram and the [West wall](#).

Betts decided to add an island to the West wall so we gain a snack counter and break up the room (which contains both the A/V room and the kitchen. The size is about 38 x 16'.) One of the corner cabinets will be the trash/recycling area (if we ever get recycling in the City again).

The hyperlinks provided lead to a “House Rebuilding” [set](#) of 56 photos on Flickr.com, which document the plans for various rooms in the home. From ceiling beams to half pantries, the photo-hosting site extends her blog’s ability to capture what the room-by-room renovation process is like, again offering local knowledge beyond what a traditional media outlet would broadcast.

Furthermore, while these are not necessarily powerful images, they allow for increased public participation in her narrative as readers can leave comments on both her blog and her Flickr feed.³⁵

Morwen’s anticipation of getting back into her “real” home dominated much of her writing in 2008, although moving dates were perpetually postponed. On February 16, 2008, she enthusiastically shared the following:

[“I’m Getting a B’Day Present”](#)

WHOO HOO! *does cartwheels*

We are moving back into our home at the end of this month. It will have been 30 months since Betts and I slept in our house. Things

³⁵ For more on the pivotal role of Flickr images in “crisis informatics,” see [“In Search of the Bigger Picture: The Emergent Role of On-Line Photo Sharing in Times of Disaster.”](#)

won't be finished there when this happens, but we'll have enough ready for us to be able to use the place. One bathroom will be finished, same goes for the kitchen, our offices and the bedroom. I can't wait to see how our construction crew deals with us being around 24/7, much less having to deal with the katz bouncing off the walls. (Thank goodness that they are painting this week: I don't want the walls "textured" with cat fur.) And we also have to remember not to walk around in bras and panties. *giggles* Hell, we need curtains! I don't wish to be seen in the office windows as a Hollywood Hustler second story display ad.

The first thing I'm cooking in the new kitchen will be two huge vats of seafood gumbo, followed by a vat of clam chowder. Betts will want some escargot, I just know it. Being back in that kitchen will be a salve to the last 30 months of Hell.

In *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman writes, "The survivor who has achieved commonality with others can rest from her labors. Her recovery is accomplished; all that remains before her is her life" (236). While she acknowledges that the construction crew will still be around, Morwen's spontaneous remarks about what she will cook and what she knows Betts will want signals the "commonality" Herman describes. She will be back in her home, in her kitchen, just like other New Orleanians, or even just like her former, pre-Katrina self.

However, delays abound, which postpone her full "recovery." She blogs in late March that her next hope of moving in is "by the weekend of April 12th" ("[Our](#)

[House- March 25th, '08](#)) but then on May 5th reveals the “electrical guy hasn’t finished the last 10% he has already been paid for. Seems that his \$250K contract means more to him than the folks he contracted with months ago. Lawsuit is coming” ([“More on the House”](#)). As previously mentioned, she and Betts finally move back into their repaired home in August of 2008. Her blog post [“Home For the 3rd Anniversary of the Flood”](#) summarizes the experience as follows: “There have been good times and many, many roadblocks and poop spilled upon us in getting this far. I don’t feel like going into the gory details right now... I’m groovin’!”³⁶

I have focused these last few pages on the diary-style entries devoted to Morwen’s house rebuilding process, but *Gentilly Girl* as a whole is a blog that cuts across a wide variety of topics. Her activist efforts come through in many forms, with posting categories dedicated to everything from the ACLU to Women’s Health, but one that fittingly extends my present analysis is that of “green living.” An effort she began blogging about in September of 2006, Morwen champions solar initiatives:

I’ve done the research and cost analysis, understand the various technologies... just waiting on the storm-worthiness of various

³⁶ To top it off, the very next day Hurricane Gustav hit. As she describes in her end of the year [“Good Bye 2008”](#) post, she and Betts did not evacuate. She “stayed online all night and then lost power the next morning as Baton Rouge was getting the storm. Our home stood like a rock, but the next five days it was hotter than Hell without power to cool the place down...From then until early November, Betts and I crashed and burned as so much of the pain, sorrow and stress of the last 3 years somewhat flowed out of us.”

systems. I've also sent out the call to get LA to establish guidelines and exemptions for those who wish to go Solar in this great state. This is not a cure for flooding or storms, but it is a way to maintain viability for our survival in the case of the aforementioned. ([“The New Orleans Solar Initiative”](#))

Beyond preaching, “Electricity is vital for our communications, our livelihoods, and our very survival,” her renovated home has a geo-thermal system. In a post written the day after moving in she offers the following details about how to [“Just Say ‘NO’ to Entergy”](#):

Gentle Readers, many of you know my complete disregard and mistrust I have for electric/gas Utility companies. They hold a monopoly over our lives and our pocket books. Under Entergy New Orleans we are as rats on a cage and the utility does what it wishes to us for the sake of their shareholders. This shit must stop or the rebuilding effort here is going to die on the vine...

Betts and I have already taken the first steps to independence on this issue by rebuilding Green... The next step is the final one needed to cut the umbilical cord, and that is adding the Solar system to complete the changeover.

I'll be meeting with a company in the next week in order to facilitate our possibly being a model home (using a 70 year old house) to prove the workability of the concept of home energy freedom. It won't eliminate our need for Natural Gas for the stove and our

back-up generator, but our excess power production will provide more than enough roll-over credits to cover that expense.

As Morwen made it very clear in our wiki interview, it is very important for her “to stand forward and deliver, and not just be someone behind a keyboard,” and her willingness to offer her home as a model illustrates that. In fact, turning her loss and subsequent restoration into a positive, for both her carbon footprint and utility bill, is environmental activism that extends to improve others’ lives along the Gulf Coast.

All the same, I cannot offer a complete profile of Morwen if I do not mention the months when her blogging waned. Between March and August of 2009, she averaged five posts a month, with the majority of those being three sentences or less and oftentimes providing only a title and the hyperlinked phrase “go here.” Upon reconnecting with the rest of the New Orleans blogging community at the most recent Rising Tide conference, she wrote the following interpretation of what had changed:

August 22, 2009

[“Time To Go Back To Blogging”](#)

Over the last few months my Blogging has almost become non-existent. It’s not that I don’t have enough to rant about... I’m just tired. Four years of slogging and smacking down mooks for being stooopid on top of the cares of rebuilding our home and lives, care for friends and love for New Orleans have taken much out of me...

For months I've been more of a news aggregator funneling good pieces onto dear old FB [Facebook] and just letting the chips fall as they will. I had gotten away from what I started doing right after the Flood in educating folks about what was going down here and explaining the arcane systems that the powers-that-be had concocted for the rebuilding of the Gulf Coast. One-liners followed by a link doesn't fit the bill in my book...

There has to be the meat, the processing of a news article by a person in order to make sense, show some relation and postulate what a political decision can lead to down the line.

In this offhanded critique of Facebook, Morwen has redefined the purpose of her blog. Buttons like "Share on Facebook" may immediately share content to her profile and her friends' news feeds, and thus provide quicker real-time responses than her blog, but this speed is not what Morwen wants. Using this post to vow to blog more regularly, she establishes *Gentilly Girl* as a space that allows for both self-projection and the processing of information. Most importantly, it is the best possible space for her to continue her post-Katrina narrative:

...when I just want to talk about life or my beloved New Orleans, I will do just that. There is a story to be told about a chunk of the country that has been used and abused for the Nation's benefit but is sadly lacking when it comes to being helped to heal. (the volunteers who have come understand and we hail them). I'm talking State and Federal governments and the oil/gas companies.

I'm talking about the destruction of our wetlands... the disregard for the folk of the swamps as just fools and simple folk. About buying a populace and culture and just running it into the ground because "people of this region do not count".

Yes we do. Without us and the sacrifices over the last century the rest of the U.S. would not have what it has now. Our homeland, bought as just swamp and some chattel have been almost crushed, but life still flows here.

All in all, *Gentilly Girl* is but one blog inspired by a real world event that offers readers worldwide a more complete and powerful picture of what a life in post-Katrina New Orleans is like.

Conclusion

Charlotte, Maitri, and Morwen use their blogs to share the details of their city's recovery, not to mention their own personal reprieve, thereby making this a chapter that showcases the ability for a community inextricably linked by disaster to state their passion and grief in public online spaces. There were many other bloggers who responded to my interview queries but not profiled here, primarily because I wanted to devote my attention to bloggers who experience and expertise differed. I also wanted to offer extended examples so to illustrate the affordances of the blog genre as I detailed in Chapter Two. Still, of the three you meet here, it is revealing that all made reference to their fellow community of bloggers, signaling, "although the New Orleans technological revolution might be

new, in many ways its use as a community tool is a natural extension of traditional New Orleans culture” (Polizter).

To close, I offer the following comments from several NOLA Bloggers, all who participated in the “NOLA Bloggers Wiki” interactive interview. These locals write out of concern for their city and, as such, have become a great collective for researching and communicating pertinent issues in post-Katrina New Orleans:

- Loki at [Humid City](#): Katrina made me write much more. My audience expanded due to attention from the BBC, Air America and their media and I felt an obligation to write a lot about the things that everyone seems to be forgetting. I blog because people need to know what has happened. They need to understand how the powers they rely on have deserted them in favor of plutocratic ambitions. What happened here (and is still happening) is a betrayal of the principles this nation was founded upon.
- Bart at [b.rox](#): More people read what I am writing and of course that has an effect. I’d say I’ve maintained my writing focus. I still write about my life. But my life has changed somewhat because of those failed floodwalls.
- Leigh at [Liprap’s Lament](#): The Katrina effects are all over my blog, and will be for a long time to come. I would have to be hermetically sealed in a box for it not to have an effect on what I write...

- Samantha at [New Orleans Slate](#): I blog about New Orleans: my life here, issues that are in the forefront of life here, whatever I happen to be thinking about or pissed off about or celebrating on any given day. I unfortunately don't have as much time to write as I used to, but that will be changed shortly. While I have many opinions on national issues, I generally don't write much about them unless they are clearly connected to a New Orleans issue. I figure there are enough folks out there writing about that, they don't need my big mouth.
- Sharon at [DotCalm](#): Since I was already blogging about New Orleans and Loyola before the storm and the flood, I just kept on afterwards...By late winter or early spring I was aware of more and more blogs emerging out of New Orleans and The Aftermath, and was transfixed, captured. I couldn't take my mind off of what was happening or get enough of what the NOLA bloggers were saying...I don't only blog about New Orleans and most of my readers are not New Orleanians, but I feel an obligation to do what little I can do to keep the story alive, to keep it top of mind, and to provide some kind of conduit for New Orleans issues to the non-NOLA blogosphere.

As these final remarks demonstrate, the solidarity amongst these bloggers to give their readers authentic glimpses of the Katrina experience has been transformational, both for their individual livelihoods and for their communities. By sharing details that traditional media rarely address and “pioneering new applications of social media to give citizens a stronger voice in the democratic process” (Poltzer), the NOLA Bloggers bring about personal relief and inspire further recovery.

Chapter Five: Understanding Katrina

Within the story, be it oral or written, lies the kernel of our human experience. By melding the research to which we expose ourselves with our own embedded archetypes of process, the writers among us can unravel from their core a narrative thread of connection that can point to a new way of being.

Rebecca Carmi, qtd. in Don Trent Jacobs
(Four Arrows), *The Authentic Dissertation* 55

Introduction

Ever since 9/11, when what happened on an ordinary workday permanently changed our nation, the media are hypersensitive to react quickly and to bring us the “breaking news” surrounding a disaster from several different locations and camera angles. But when Hurricane Katrina happened, the levees broke, and water literally got in the way. The Internet became a shared space for stories to be told, information to be exchanged, facts to emerge, whistles to be blown, and acts of charity to be organized. Beginning with my own narrative about the storm’s impact on my blog, this dissertation illustrates the extent to which current New Orleans bloggers use digital spaces to reveal their “new ways of being” as well as spearhead grassroots movements.

I feel fortunate to have had the opportunity to apply both my blogging and academic background to this extended examination of a national event. As sociologist and communications scholar Carolyn Ellis writes in her 1995 book *Final Negotiations*, “It seems sensible to make a project out of this, to pretend

that something positive is happening. Writing soothes me. Recording the events frees my mind and body to relax. Knowing that the details are recorded keeps me from going over and over them, to see if I can force a different outcome” (153). While hers is a story of losing a partner, it is also the story of Ellis living dual lives—one of caretaker and the other of young academic. In my case, this work is a tale of my dual life as a New Orleanian and blog researcher.

Few people understand the scope of Hurricane Katrina until they travel to the city for themselves and talk to its residents who are trying so hard to rebuild and just get by. Yet there are so many Americans who refuse to visit because they think New Orleans is still under water and overrun with looters. That ignorance is what I hope my research helps people overcome. These blogs allow them the change to move beyond that single week of cable news and realize that the trauma is going into its fifth year now.

Indeed, the panic surrounding Hurricane Gustav began on the 3rd anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, and I received the following email from a friend:

Let me tell you though - it's the weirdest thing - people are not even talking about Katrina today. We're all too worried about Gustav and Hannah. It's surreal that today of all days we're bagging things, putting computers and other things on desks, cleaning out fridges, gassing up (you should see the lines), etc. I think people are not talking about Katrina BECAUSE it's Katrina that has allowed for this type of anxiety during an evacuation. I

would never wish anyone to experience this frenzy and stress, but everyone who is here is feeling it.

I know you are not here and were not here for Katrina, but you understand on a level that many who were not here do not get - does that sentence even make sense? If you could mention in your blogs today that it's THAT storm (literally she who is not named today) that is the underlying root cause of all tension, frustration and fear right now - it is THAT experience that has us all living queasy for this storm - and to please treat us nicely when we start showing up in search of rest, I'd really appreciate it. More than even for Katrina I think, we're really going to need to be handled with kid gloves - everyone is on edge and honestly, it's kind of scary. (Brockman)

That tension, frustration and fear is why I feel my dissertation project is so important. As its author, I realize I am composing an emotionally charged piece, but at its heart are the words of so many locals that expose the historical, economic, and social inequalities that lie just beneath the surface and under the guise of a natural disaster.

Teaching Katrina/2006-2007

As is often the case, what I am researching finds its way into my classroom. Assigning texts written by various New Orleans-based authors prompts my undergraduates to distinguish how writers from a localized place can

attract outside readers by providing extended examples and concretizing the subject matter. While at the University of South Florida, my primary focus was sharing essays from the previously mentioned book, *1 Dead in Attic* by Chris Rose³⁷. Sharing his views and insight of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the broken levees through a series of newspaper articles that he wrote for the *Times-Picayune* newspaper, Rose employs a dark sense of humor that students appreciate, especially since so many only faintly recall the television coverage. Many students also appreciate that Rose's book is not one focused on assigning blame for the outcome. Instead, he relies on his own experience as a reporter let back into the city early because of his press pass and narrates what he witnessed and encountered in those early days and months after the storm.

Sharing this Katrina-related text with my students has not always been easy, though, even at a Florida university where one would expect the students to have some familiarity with the woes of hurricane evacuation, FEMA, and coastal erosion. I was shocked when a student assigned to respond to Rose's essay "[Hell and Back](#)" wrote: "Katrina was not the worst thing to ever happen. The people who stayed there got what they deserved... Common sense seems to escape many of the people living there. I, for one, do not care to hear about this rubbish. Whining never gets anyone anywhere." Knowing the student who wrote this was very much aware that my own parents had evacuated and still lost

³⁷ Since my first use of his book in 2006, several [universities](#) feel that the book stands out as an artifact of a real-world event that impacted the nation and have chosen it as the "Common Read" text, required reading for all incoming freshman.

everything upset me greatly, but I stepped back and reevaluated both my lesson plan and her writing as just that, an academic text. The latter's flaws are obvious; this student gave no support to her opinion, made hasty generalizations, and inaccurately summarized Rose's text. However, as a teacher and researcher also dealing with survivor's guilt, I became insecure and began questioning my place project—was I forcing my students to read too much Katrina-related prose? Was I asking them to think about something they did not want to consider, and was that why some reacted with emotional, visceral, and underdeveloped responses?

Before I returned this set of papers and opened my office door for a meeting with this student to discuss how to frame an analytical reader response rather than one laden with a judgmental tone (something this particular student went on to do in subsequent essays, even those having nothing to do with Hurricane Katrina), I turned to the WPA-listserv with my questions hoping to elicit advice from fellow compositionists. Many responses came from across the nation and all reminded me to distance myself, especially since such lack of compassion pains me personally, and try to see the issue from the student's point of view. Because I had invited my students to speak their minds, this was a successful exercise if this student truly felt comfortable in making these remarks. However, there is always a lesson in audience to be learned. Because I am the grader, perhaps future assignments like these, where emotionally charged writing can result, can be better discussed in small groups where their peers can quickly evaluate the writing and offer alternative reactions. Allowing such discussions to

happen makes these moments teachable ones, and if I plan to continue to include trauma-related readings, I need to remind students to distinguish between compassionate and disparaging uses of tone as argumentative strategies.

Ultimately, this incident reminded me once again of the value of expressing one's trauma. Referencing Louise DeSalvo, "Often...trauma remains undisclosed because, though people would like to discuss it, they can't or won't because they fear punishment, embarrassment, or disapproval or because they can't find an appropriate audience" (24). If I were to purposefully censor my course and not include Katrina stories, then I would be silencing the voices, including mine, of people who so desperately need to be heard. In the years since that experience, I have revised my lesson plan to include a greater range of readings—including examples from the New Orleans blogosphere—so as to contextualize the event.

Teaching Katrina/2008-present

Knowing now that many teachers in Louisiana have had students express their "Katrina fatigue" when being asked to read and write on storm-related material, which may have been the case in Florida as well, my main goal with my current students at the University of Wisconsin-Stout has been the following: to expose them to the reality of disaster, which is unfortunately so prevalent these days, and let the writing of place-specific authors inform them of what really happened and is still (not) happening in terms of the recovery process. Given

their unfamiliarity with the Gulf Coast region, these students have been more receptive than those in Florida. Perhaps because they were so removed from the event when it happened, or because their severe weather experiences are more often than not snow-related, this is often their first opportunity to comprehend how Hurricane Katrina affected New Orleans and its residents.

My “Reading and Related Writing” course syllabus still includes Chris Rose’s *1 Dead in Attic*, but has been supplemented by essays in a special Hurricane Katrina-specific issue of the *Oxford American*, the book *Why New Orleans Matters* by Tom Piazza, and the films *When the Levees Broke* and [“The Old Man and the Storm.”](#) We move back and forth between print, visual, and web-based reading materials in order to problematize what students may already know about Hurricane Katrina as well as other disasters. Over the semester they are to consider whether the passage of time has made these texts more moving and significant or easier to forget.

Beginning with Rose’s *1 Dead in Attic*, students’ reactions have been positive. Thinking it would be a book about blaming the government, they admit to Rose’s personal perspective changing the way they understand the disaster. Many had only considered the loss of tangible things, but the sensory details Rose shares allows them to see how this event has psychologically affected so many different people and their lives. One student admitted in our discussion board: “I didn’t realize or think about the how people who stayed there had to change their way of life. When watching the news you don’t truly see the unpacked and mental damage Katrina had on the New Orleanians.” Another

student responded to her saying, “I agree with not realizing the mental damage that the residents have had to endure. It never really occurs to you when you're watching the news because we are so desensitized...”

Extending these reactions is yet another student who wrote, “Chris Rose gives us a look at the Katrina disaster in ways that none of the news media and reports could ever hope to accomplish.” He went on to identify what he saw as a major quest for Rose—normalcy:

Many people would agree with the idea that in order to live a comfortable life, you must live a normal life. Katrina took that from the people of New Orleans and Rose's book gives us a firsthand account of how some of the people left in that city were able to show a resiliency that goes beyond phenomenal. Though, to put it into perspective, Rose does not use statistics or really tell you just what the Katrina devastation is like or how the normality of life was disturbed.

This student's final statement is interesting because it brings up a critique many current students have: this book **is** just one person's perspective, which only takes us from August 29, 2005, to December 31, 2006, and it is that of a man whose home only “suffered a broken screen door and a loose gutter” (Rose xvi). With each semester that passes, my students want to know more, including what they often describe as “the statistics of Hurricane Katrina,” and how New Orleanians nowadays are recovering and dealing with the ruins and losses. While they respect the knowledge and experience Rose provides, with every

year that passes since the storm, they want (and need) the most up-to-date information.

Being on a laptop campus³⁸ gives me the opportunity to allow my students to work independently or in small groups to seek answers to such questions almost as soon as they are raised. As Darin Payne writes in “The World Wide Agora: Negotiating Citizenship and Ownership of Response Online,” if left to mainstream media, national tragedies often become generalized. However, “What the Web offers, then, are direct and immediate possibilities for engagement in public dialogues about (inter)national events—dialogues that transcend traditional boundaries imposed by time, space, and access to the means of production” (Payne 16). Comparing previously mentioned “finished” memoirs, narratives, and histories with “unfinished” and up-to-the-minute web postings, students build upon what they recognize about the Internet’s immediacy and move towards an informed critique about whether or not new media outlets provide opportunities for the voices of marginalized victims to be heard.

When I first offer [the list of NOLA Bloggers](#) as a supplemental resource, I ask students to consider their own web presence, either in a blog or via social networking sites. Wondering if they have ever used that space to write about or reflect upon their relationship with a city or connection to a place, my purpose is

³⁸ All undergraduate students receive a laptop computer, backpack and a variety of cords/accessories as well as software, wireless and wired connectivity on campus. In addition to faculty relying on the course management system, Desire to Learn, our campus also offers 24/7 service and support, training, network storage, email, web page space, and multimedia classrooms.

to extend our discussion of Hurricane Katrina to include one about the convergence of public, place, and life writing. Not only does analysis of the generative texts shared by victims, evacuees, and survivors of disaster allow them to see extended examples of Web 2.0 in action, they can reflect upon how they have changed as readers and citizens because of the immediacy with which they can both find and produce information on the Internet and use it to make meaningful decisions.

When defining Web 2.0 technologies with my current classes, I refer to the seminal debate between Andrew Keen and David Weinberger, [“The Good, the Bad, And the 'Web 2.0.’”](#) We review significant statements from each author and then try to find our own examples that illustrate their dialogue. While Keen believes, “Web 2.0 tells us that we all have something interesting to say and that we should broadcast it to the world,” he fears “the overall consequence of the democratized blogosphere is akin to leaving the toilet seat down.” One need only to glance at the “Most Popular” and “Videos Being Watched Now” categories on *YouTube* to see examples of what he means; in fact, I often show the [“Numa Numa video.”](#) which with over seven million views is one of the most viewed viral videos in the world. As entertaining as it might be to watch (and [duplicate](#)), it exemplifies Keen’s point that “Web 2.0 is a miasma of trivia and irrelevance. It doesn’t matter.”

However, Weinberger’s optimism surpasses Keen’s cynicism:

Andrew, the mud you throw obscures the issues you raise. Porn sites, silly posts, monkeys, cockroaches, toilet seats. This rhetoric

isn't helpful. In fact, in your attempt to be controversial, you're playing into the hands of political and economic forces that would like the Internet to be nothing more than an extension of the mass media...

But we are not replicating the mainstream media. We're building something new. We're doing it together. Its fundamental elements are not bricks of content but the mortar of links, and links are connections of meaning and involvement.

With this discussion of Web 2.0 fresh in their minds, referring students [the list of NOLA Bloggers](#) allows them to see how, beyond the likes of Chris Rose and other traditional journalists, the work of the New Orleans blogosphere represents this “new” media.

As the profiles in Chapter Four illustrated, the links bloggers share can “create an infrastructure of meaning” (Weinberger) and now that many of the bloggers embed images and video into their blog posts, students can watch them to broaden their understanding of disaster. For example, to offset my use of the “Numa Numa video,” I show the following video created by “Editor B” who blogs at [b.rox](#). Having created [his own vimeo channel](#), Editor B spent much of 2006 documenting life 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, and 11 “months post-Katrina.” While his video posts have waned, his final one simply titled [“Grocery”](#) from January 17, 2007, shows the extent to which the city still needs attention. Only 45-seconds long, it demonstrates Weinberger’s belief that, “With the Web, we can still listen to the world's greatest, but we can find others who touch us even though their

technique isn't perfect." Asking students to consider the bloggers' concerns, perspectives, and values as well as the larger cultural narratives that influence them, we use posts like this to discuss awareness of audience and the value of "going public," not to mention the passion these locals have for the place they insist on calling home.

Conclusion

This dissertation has shown how NOLA bloggers as a technologically literate group use their blog [entries](#), [photos](#), and [videos](#) to repeat the sentiment of being neglected, misunderstood, and misrepresented. They embody [Dan Gillmor](#)'s principles of a new media literacy—skepticism, judgment, understanding, and reporting—when they share their [painful memories](#) and their [daily triumphs](#); build on the trust quotient their virtual community has established; use listservs and wikis to organize [face-to-face efforts](#); and reach out and [teach others](#) how to access information.

As a blogger, Internet researcher, and teacher, my career is focused on engaging students and remaining relevant. This study has focused on recognizing how traumatic events like Hurricane Katrina can become the impetus for discussions about authentic writing and recalling of memories; however, I believe those of us committed to using technology to teach writing can also use it to enhance our understanding of what it means to be part of a democratized media. Still, much work must still be done to examine the phenomenon of selfless and successful social media use in the aftermath of disaster.

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A proud New Orleans native, her research into the rebuilding of New Orleans through new media endeavors can be read in scholarly journals such as *Computers and Composition Online* and *Reflections: A Journal of Writing, Service-Learning, and Community Literacy* as well as on prominent blog sites such as the Open Society Institute's *Katrina: An UnNatural Disaster* and the Harvard University hosted *Publius Project*. She credits these publications and opportunities to the wonderful group of Internet researchers, faculty, and staff she met during the 2007 Oxford Internet Institute Summer Doctoral Programme.

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