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Unstoppable Crises

Hurricane Katrina in Film and Media Representations

Abstract

*This paper examines how film and media representations have become a crucial tool of political response to the Katrina emergency, by framing it as emblematic of the compounded crises that so-called ‘extreme natural events’ highlight, involving the exacerbation of social injustice and second class citizenship, the questioning of the relationship between natural phenomena and man-made disaster, and the special vulnerability of coastal cities to the effects of climate change. By analyzing four visual texts emerging from the Katrina crisis—Spike Lee’s *When the Levee Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006), Carl Deal and Tia Lessin’s *Trouble the Water* (2008); HBO’s *Treme* (2009-2013), Benh Zeitlin’s *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012)—this paper frames eco-catastrophe as a new conceptual paradigm of modernity.*

Keywords: *natural disasters, Hurricane Katrina, social justice, film and media representations*

1. Modernity’s extended crises

In April 1927, spring thaw and weeks of rain poured unprecedented quantities of water into the Mississippi River, pushing it beyond its boundaries and setting off the most destructive river flood in the history of the United States to date, one that caused inundation in seven states, killing hundreds of people and displacing hundreds of thousands. In the turbulent season leading up to what became known as the Great Flood, Bessie Smith, the most popular female blues singer of the 1920s and 1930s, wrote the now classic “Backwater Blues.” Part of an outpouring of topical songs, sermons, poetry and prose literature, much of it coming from the black community and testifying to the human suffering caused by the flood, “Backwater Blues” has engraved that in popular culture (Evans 2007, 97-ff). In *The Flood Year 1927: A Cultural History*, Susan Scott Parrish makes the compelling point that the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 has forced a rethinking of how we perceive and understand the modern age. Affecting over

600,000 people, mostly in Arkansas, Mississippi and in Louisiana's Mississippi Delta, it was one of several events triggering the Great Migration from the U.S. South to the industrial cities of the North and the Midwest. Not unlike world wars, financial collapses and the "unstoppable global extension of crises" that have marked the 20th century and have overflowed into the 21st, the Great Mississippi Flood—along with those that followed, with growing frequency, in the next decades—demands, according to Parrish, a new conceptual paradigm that brings "eco-catastrophe into our discussions of modernity, its experiences, and its cultures" (Parrish 2018, 3).

Three quarters of a century after the Great Flood, the Louisiana and Alabama coasts withstood the ravages of another deadly hurricane, named Katrina, a tropical storm that hit in late August 2005, taking the lives of over 1,800 people (US Census Bureau 2015) and causing widespread social and economic disruption in the region, especially in New Orleans. In this paper, I will examine how film and media representations became a crucial tool of political response to the Katrina emergency, by framing it as emblematic of the compounded crises that so-called 'extreme natural events' highlight: the way in which natural calamities exacerbate issues of social injustice and second class citizenship; how the notion of a 'natural disaster' is, in fact, a figure of speech, a euphemism to deflect public awareness on the fact that if phenomena are natural, disasters are in fact man-made, i.e. the result of human incompetence or inaction; and, finally, the extent to which coastal cities today are particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change.

New Orleans, a city founded by the French in the early 18th century to provide a sea outlet for the economic development of the US South, was originally built on a curve of high flood land (hence nicknamed the 'Crescent City') that the Mississippi River had deposited over millions of years. Starting in the late 1800s and continuing into the early 20th century, aggressive land reclamation campaigns extended the city: new low-lying neighborhoods emerged after swamps behind the crescent were drained and cleared; landfill was dumped into Lake Pontchartrain, a massive body of water north of the city that, together with Lake Borgne to the east and the Mississippi River to the south (as well as numerous bayous and smaller lakes), encircles New Orleans in what has been dubbed "the Death Valley of the Gulf Coast" (Steinberg 2003, 75). Relying on technology to counter forbidding natural forces, humans have shaped this extremely vulnerable delta ecosystem into a city of hundreds of thousands of inhabitants, in a site where land and water wage a millennial battle against each other.

As climate change makes the cyclical storms and hurricanes native to the region's tropical climate into ever more destructive events, New Orleans, an early product of the globalization of

trade, stands as a forewarning of the threats impending on planet earth, especially its coastal regions, precisely as a result of that globalization. In *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh has pointed to the fact that “[i]n a substantially altered world, [...] sea-level rise has swallowed the Sundarbans and made cities like Kolkata, New York and Bangkok [and, I would add, New Orleans] uninhabitable,” and has argued that it is surely no accident that these cities “were all brought into being through early globalization,” being linked to each other “not only through the circumstances of their founding but also through patterns of trade that expanded and accelerated Western economies” (Ghosh 2016, 11 and 54). Because 75% of the world population is expected, by 2025, to live in or near coastlines (Dawson 2017, 6), the catastrophic outcomes of the Katrina crisis should sound as a premonition to the possibility of an anthropogenic calamity in the coming decades and centuries, unless proper and radical remedial action is taken to redress what Ghosh has bemoaned as the “European Enlightenment’s predatory hubris in relation to the earth and its resources” (Ghosh 2016, 56).

The cultural responses to Hurricane Katrina that I will explore here seem to suggest a consensus in identifying the key triggers of the impending crisis: the prevalence of profit over community welfare in the neoliberal economy; the long-ingrained practices of social exclusion that have hit forcefully people of color in the US, especially in the southern States; and the resistance to create institutions promoting self-reliance and welfare in all the components of society.

2. Hurricane Katrina

The Katrina disaster began for New Orleans on the morning of August 29, 2005, as the tropical hurricane that went by that name made landfall south of the city, swelling the waters at various points in and around the metropolitan area. What media outlets were quick to dub the ‘Storm of the Century’ caused destruction of catastrophic proportion and reinforced America’s newfound “collective sense of vulnerability and insecurity” (Hodgin 2017, 102) that had been brought on only four years earlier by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Katrina—only the latest of dozens of major hurricanes hitting the region over the previous decades and centuries—was the sixth strongest Atlantic hurricane ever recorded and the third strongest ever to reach the continental United States. It caused destruction not only in New Orleans, but across the entire Mississippi coast and into Alabama, as far as a hundred miles from the storm’s center (Levitt and Whitaker 2009, 2), resulting in one of the five deadliest—and the costliest—natural disasters in the history of the United States (Levitt and Whitaker 2009, 2). Its impact was devastating: within a few days of the hurricane’s landfall, only 15% of

New Orleans remained above water, with some sections of the city as much as 10 feet (3 m) underwater. Three hundred thousand homes were destroyed in the Gulf Coast Region. In New Orleans alone, 134,000 housing units—70% of all occupied units—were lost or suffered damage from the hurricane and the subsequent flooding (Hodgin 2017, 102). Of the over 1,800 deaths, most occurred in homes, in attics, and on rooftops where people were stranded or swept away. More than one million people were evacuated (Adams 2013, 25).

It would be inaccurate to blame the New Orleans disaster of 2005 on Hurricane Katrina alone. Although the storm was certainly its trigger, the devastation was the consequence of a chain of events related to the complex geography of the coastal city and its surrounding region. The region sits in a natural basin, and some of New Orleans lies below sea level, being therefore particularly prone to flooding. Just south of the city, where the mighty Mississippi flows into the Gulf of Mexico, intense hurricanes can push seawater onto land, creating what is known as a ‘storm surge.’ As Hurricane Katrina hit, New Orleans and surrounding parishes saw record storm surges as high as 19 feet (6 m). New Orleans and its adjoining parishes have relied since their founding upon a system of flood protection that has evolved over a period of 280 years, made up of drainage canals, built to push floodwaters out of the city and into the adjoining bayous and lakes; pumping stations, to facilitate the flow of those floodwaters towards their outlets; and a system of artificial walls along the Mississippi and the south shore of Lake Pontchartrain, as well as floodwall structures along the three main outfall canals (collectively known as ‘levees’). When Hurricane Katrina made landfall on August 29, 2005 along the Louisiana and Mississippi coasts, a storm surge from the Gulf of Mexico flowed into Lake Pontchartrain. The levees along the south shore of Lake Pontchartrain (including both Orleans and Jefferson Parish) withstood the elevated lake levels as designed. However, the floodwall structures along the three outfall canals failed in multiple locations. The surge itself was rendered ever more devastating because a series of man-made canals—shipping channels as well as a web of thousands of miles of canals built for drilling oil and gas in Louisiana’s wetlands—allowed the storm surge to penetrate further inland, in a chain of devastation that, beyond flooding, provoked sea water to penetrate freshwater environments, therefore dissolving “like veins of acid” the delicate vegetation that had grown over the millennia to hold coastal land together (Dawson 2017, 104).

3. Inequality revealed

In *Extreme Cities*, Ashley Dawson has very well highlighted the chain effects that environmental neglect can all too easily set in motion, especially on the most vulnerable.

Quoting geographer Neil Smith, who wrote after Katrina that “in every phase and aspect of a disaster—causes, vulnerability, preparedness, results and response, and reconstruction—the contours of disaster and the difference between who lives and who dies is to a greater or lesser extent a social calculus,” Dawson has argued that natural disasters “are actually the product of all-too-tangible social inequalities” (2017, 10). One of the cities with the highest percentage of African Americans in the nation (67% in 2005), 40% of whom living at or below the poverty line (Levitt and Whitaker 2009, 7), New Orleans had become, by the time Katrina hit, highly segregated by race—a city where, according to the Brookings Institution, blacks and whites lived “in quite literally different worlds” (Levitt and Whitaker 2009, 7). Although the devastation of the hurricane affected the whole city, not all parts of the city and not all of its population were hit equally. Poor black areas were disproportionately affected. In one of the most affected parts, the Lower Ninth Ward, a low-lying, predominantly black neighborhood, over 90% of homes were destroyed, and hundreds of people died.

Many of those left homeless by Katrina were living well below the poverty line before the storm struck, a condition which made them extremely vulnerable to its wrath and the many human failures that followed (Levitt and Whitaker 2009, 2). Not having a car, the poorer New Orleans residents were unable to flee the city before the hurricane hit. And since no plans for a mass evacuation of the city had ever been put in place (Brinkley 2014, 19), thousands of the poorer residents waited after the hurricane for help that did not arrive and had to resort to ways of survival that aligned New Orleans with many third-world metropolises. Images of people making desperate SOS signs or rafts out of their refrigerator doors, sheltered under precarious conditions at the Superdome or the Convention Center, or stranded on bridges and highways shocked the world. In *The Shock Doctrine* Naomi Klein has put it clearly: “even if most of us had resigned ourselves to the daily inequalities of who has access to healthcare and whose schools have decent equipment, there was still a widespread assumption that disasters were supposed to be different. It was taken for granted that the state—at least in a rich country—would come to the aid of the people during a cataclysmic event” (Klein 2007, 515). While visiting the Convention Center, Michael Brown, then director of FEMA, candidly admitted that during that visit he saw people he never knew existed (Monteith 2010, 475).

Writing about the 1927 Mississippi Flood, Richard Mizelle has pointed out that the flood was “part of a much longer narrative of how race, class, gender, and questions of social worth are framed through an environmental disaster” (Mizelle 2014, 27)—a claim that very well fits the Katrina events, where race and class became deciding factors in the level and type of misery that natural events can generate. A phrase, ‘natural disaster,’ that in fact sounds more as a

linguistic diversion, a euphemism—the *New Yorker* has pointedly suggested—“carrying a hint of absolution” (Cobb 2015). Hayden White has written that “there are no ‘disasters’ and certainly no ‘tragedies’ in nature.” Rather, the disastrous consequences of natural events “attach to the human beings who insufficiently prepared for the occurrence of this type of event in the physical areas affected by them” (White 2008, 15). Hurricanes, earthquakes, and floods are natural phenomena; disasters, on the other hand, are not, as Ted Steinberg’s history of natural disasters in America pointedly suggests, “acts of God,” but rather the work of humankind (Steinberg 2003). The highest number of deaths during Katrina came from neighborhoods with a black majority, starkly reflecting, in the words of Michael Samuel, the “legacy of racial and economic segregation [which] has left specific segments of urban communities isolated from institutional resources, economic opportunity, and political influence and particularly vulnerable to disaster” (Samuel 2015, 44). These deaths made the 2005 storm a proof of the “reversed [...] temporal order of modernity” that Amitav Ghosh has written about in *The Great Derangement*, a new historical stage when “those on the margins are now the first to experience the future that awaits all of us; it is they who confront most directly what Thoreau called ‘vast, Titanic, inhuman nature’” (Ghosh 2016, 63).

After Katrina, the overall New Orleans population fell from around 490,000 (in April 2000) to approximately 210,000 (in July 2006)—a 42% decrease. One year after Katrina, suicide rates were three times higher than before the hurricane (Hodgin 2017, 102; Greene 2009, 216). Ten years later, the city had barely recovered, with hundreds of people still unaccounted for and thousands not having returned to their home city (Schigoda 2011). Writing in August 2015, in a feature entitled “10 years after Katrina,” the *New York Times* well summarized the post-Katrina plight:

It is a wonder that any of it is here at all [...] on Aug. 29, 2005, it all seemed lost. Four-fifths of the city lay submerged as residents frantically signaled for help from their rooftops and thousands were stranded at the Superdome, a congregation of the desperate and poor. From the moment the storm surge of Hurricane Katrina dismantled a fatally defective levee system, New Orleans became a global symbol of American dysfunction and government negligence. At every level and in every duty, from engineering to social policy to basic logistics, there were revelations of malfunction and failure before, during, and after Katrina. Ten years later, it is not exactly right to say that New Orleans is back.

Although the city’s population has now grown 12% since 2010—in fact, one of the fastest growths in the US—census figures for 2020 place it at 383 thousand, still over 20% below pre-Katrina

levels. And the hurricane has also reshuffled the city's ethnic mix, the city's black population has shrunk from 67 in 2005 to 59% today (World Population Review 2022).

Katrina showed that the management of disaster can add to, rather than alleviate, the suffering. Rescue operations were late, disorganized, and misguided. Floodwaters remained in the city for up to three weeks (Adams 2013, 25). In New Orleans, where a neighborhood's social outlook quickly changes from block to block, and skin color works as a "concealed tagging system for strict ethno-racial segregation" (Topal 2016, 2), unfair policing played a major role in the unequal treatment of the citizens in the aftermath of the hurricane. In *Black Rage in New Orleans*, an in-depth study of policing practice in the city in the decades leading up to Hurricane Katrina, Leonard Moore has pointed out that "despite the heroism of the majority of officers [80% of whom had remained homeless as a consequence of the flood], a small portion of the NOPD used Katrina to continue the NOPD's tradition of law-breaking" (Moore 2010, 259). Amid lootings and mass social unrest, the local government and police utilized excessive power specifically targeting blacks. On September 1st, 2005, Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco issued a controversial order authorizing soldiers to shoot to kill looters in an effort to restore calm (Topal 2016, 2). Pictures of devastation, death, and hopelessness were aired on national media. The absolute devastation of the city of New Orleans, especially the Lower Ninth Ward, became the epicenter of public debate. The media in fact was a factor in the amplification of the violent episodes that occurred in the chaotic days and weeks that followed Katrina, providing "justification for the following heavy-handed action taken by the military and police in response to the disaster" (Topal 2016, 2).

4. Katrina's survivors as witnesses

Cultural representations of Hurricane Katrina in one way or another evolved into a spate of early-twenty-first-century crisis narratives centralizing contemporary uncertainties about race, class, region, government, and public safety. Ranging from plays, novels, and non-fictional literature to film and TV series, from graphic novels to memorials, from music to art installations and more—a wide-ranging iconography of disaster emerged in the years that followed, addressing both the underlying causes and the tragic outcomes of Hurricane Katrina. Among those representations, I would like to address four films that have provided, between 2006 and 2012, important contributions to the public discussion of the Katrina crisis: two documentaries—Spike Lee's *When the Levee Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006) and Carl Deal and Tia Lessin's *Trouble the Water* (2008); one television series, David Simon and Eric

Overmyer's *Treme* (2009-2013); and a full-length film, Benh Zeitlin's *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012).

As a whole, these visual texts stand as significant contributions to the growing archive of environmental film. Viewed chronologically, they show how cultural representations of Katrina have shifted in focus from an initial phase of concern for issues of class, race and inadequate government response, to a newer wave of narratives that shift, re-shape, and broaden the focus, by presenting “creative processings that center more inclusive and community-based aspects of what we can/should read into and take out of stories of Katrina’s devastation” (Jellenick 2015, 221). If the early texts questioned the labeling of Hurricane Katrina as a ‘natural’ phenomenon, by arguing that it rather exposed pre-existing political, economic, and social issues that the hurricane had simply laid out in plain view, the latter films focus on how the culture of modernity calls for the engagement of a new environmental paradigm.

Spike Lee’s 255-minute, four-part documentary, *When the Levees Broke*—titled after a blues song Kansas Joe McCoy and Memphis Minnie composed after the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927—programmatically refutes the logic of Katrina as ‘natural disaster.’ As Lee’s title makes clear, the disaster in New Orleans was not the hurricane itself, but rather the breaching of the levees, which were designed, constructed, and maintained by the Army Corps of Engineers. Much of *Levees* is focused on documenting the human and material tragedy brought on by Hurricane Katrina and highlighting the institutional failures that led to and exacerbated the crisis. Individual survival stories are predominant. Assembled primarily from talking-head interviews and archival footage, *Levees* frequently intercuts the interviewees’ testimonies of the events with footage of the same or similar events. This narrative approach serves to make the interviewees the film’s primary narrators, in a shift of perspective that turns the suffering victim of the flood’s devastation into a narrative authority of the experience of suffering from which they have been distanced and made into witnesses (Elliott 2010, 106).

Lee’s panoramic vision emphasizes the disposability of poor African American lives who were not adequately protected by the state and, like the other texts, explores links between the myths of post-Katrina anarchy or lawlessness—a subtext of the disaster overamplified in early media reports—and state violence. The film, as Arin Keeble has recently written, has a dual purpose: “to mourn and to critique” (Keeble 2019, 111). The film mourns the devastated city and region, the lives lost, via a large cast of commentators including academics, politicians, activists, local cultural figures, law enforcement officers, and survivors that Lee tasks with ‘testifying’ to the events. Music is the film’s palimpsest—both symbolic (in the subtitle reference to a Requiem) and formal, in the way that jazz, and in particular the songs of Lee’s long-time collaborator, and

New Orleans native, Terence Blanchard, structures its narrative. But music never romanticizes the narrative: even Louis Armstrong's nostalgic opening blues, "Do you Know What it Means to Miss New Orleans," juxtaposes highlights of the city's cultural texture—Mardi Gras, second line parades—against images of its recurring demise to the force of nature.

If *Levees* remains to this day the documentary of record on Hurricane Katrina, Carl Deal and Tia Lessin's *Trouble the Water* (2008), winner of the Grand Jury Prize at the 2008 Sundance Film Festival, stands out as a unique experiential chronicle of the catastrophe. Consistent with Lee's vision, the film's tagline "It's not about a hurricane. It's about America" announces that it also will probe Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath from the lens of the systemic failures in American public institutions that the hurricane laid bare. But, unlike *Levees*, *Trouble the Water* does it via a 'ground zero,' Cinema Verité perspective on the events by framing its narrative around an extraordinary eyewitness account of the storm: a 15 minute 'eye-of-the-storm' video shot by then 24-year-old Lower Ninth Ward resident and aspiring rapper Kimberly Rivers Roberts and her husband, Scott. Sheltering in their attic while the storm rages around them and the Ninth Ward is inundated by the flooding waters, the couple film what they see using a camcorder for minutes on end, providing a visual testimony that remains unique among the profusion of images that the event has spawned.

The resulting film intercuts Kim's eyewitness footage with the filmmakers' account of Kim's life after the storm and her eventual return home. "It's me, reporting live," Kim spoofs, as her video camera, which she had bought on the street days before the storm, records just another Sunday in one of New Orleans' historically black neighborhoods, until the day succumbs to Katrina's howling wind, lashing rain, and rising water. The footage—raw, jumpy—shows the Roberts' retreat into the attic as the rising water fills the house and no rescue operation is available. Deal and Lessin pull no punches in highlighting institutional incompetence and hypocrisy. In one first sequence, a video message by President G.W. Bush instructing New Orleans citizens to "abide by the instruction of the authorities" and sending them nothing more than "prayers" is followed by a segment from Robert's home video, where it becomes obvious that there are no "authorities" at hand to rescue the victims, and that the hurricane has left, as people portrayed in the video claim, just "you by yourself" and "nothing but our lives."

Later in the documentary, in a moment that was not captured live on video and is then recreated by the film-makers, the Roberts unsuccessfully seek help at a Naval base on high ground, only to be turned away at gunpoint. Here, Deal and Lessin's censure of government failings is expanded into the film's implicit, yet more far-reaching conclusion: people like the Roberts are already suffering from institutionalized neglect. "It's like we're un-American, like we lost our

citizenship,” Kim laments after the storm. But the real revelation is that citizenship—with all the rights and protections that it should entail—was never theirs to begin with. As one of Kim’s cousins observes, “If you don’t have money, if you don’t have status, you don’t have the government.”

In a compelling moment of the documentary, possibly its climax, Kim recasts that sense of institutional neglect into a pure art form. Finally arriving in Memphis to recuperate, Kim finds a recording of a rap song she made long before the storm, performed under her aspiring artist persona Black Kold Medina. As she stares into the camera, she raps along to the song, titled “Amazing,” the lyrics a testament to how the images captured by a camcorder on that late August day were just another iteration in the hardships of a lifetime:

I’m singin’ Momma, don’t cry, I know the rocks you takin’
 You been takin’ ‘em everyday that’s why the lights ain’t on
 You been takin’ ‘em everyday since my Daddy’s gone
 You been takin’ ‘em everyday and won’t leave ‘em alone
 You been takin’ ‘em everyday, I’m in the danger zone
 [...]
 I was just a little girl caught up in the storm
 And it still amaze me now I live to see myself grown
 I don’t need you to tell me that I’m amazing
 Cause I know what I am and what I am that I be is amazing.

To sum up so far, *When the Levees Broke* and *Trouble the Water* can be grouped among narratives that focused on institutional failures vis-à-vis the troubling possibility—to borrow Jellenik’s words—that they were “connected to the political, racial, and economic make-up of the affected citizens” (Jellenik 2015, 222). Producing some of the most jarring and enduring stories associated with the hurricane, these visual texts underline the way that the abject poverty and racism that has marked the region for generations became amplified by the events leading up to and following Hurricane Katrina. They highlight how the aggressive implementation of neoliberal practices that Naomi Klein has called “disaster capitalism” point to a future in which growing numbers of cities “have their frail and long-neglected infrastructures knocked out by disasters and then are left to rot, their core services never repaired or rehabilitated,” while the well-off “will withdraw into gated communities, their needs met by privatized providers” (Klein 2007, 525).

5. Is there a post-Katrina future?

A second group of visual texts responding to Katrina, and appearing later than those previously discussed, shift the focus from reporting to creative imagining: David Simon and Eric Overmyer's *Treme* and Benh Zeitlin's *Beasts of the Southern Wild* narrate alternative visions of New Orleans and the Bayou country of the Mississippi Delta after the hurricane.

Although iterating key critiques of the failings of the US government's response to the catastrophe, as well as its racial overtones, HBO's *Treme* focuses on its protagonists' defiant refusal—as the title of its first season suggests—to “bow” in the face of post-Katrina hardship and trauma, and rejects the ‘third world’ rhetoric of media representations of Katrina aftermath, which it contrasts with celebrations of the city's supposed harmonious multiculturalism, as centered around its cultural, and especially musical, community. The series takes its title from one of New Orleans' historic neighborhoods, the Faubourg Tremé, celebrated as the birthplace of Jazz and symbolic of a city that has been defined as “one of America's most extraordinary melting pots” (Taylor 2010, 484). *Treme* focuses on post-Katrina New Orleans and showcases a group of locals—black and white—trying to pick up their lives after the catastrophe while the city is still trying to recover amidst corruption, incompetence, and neglect. Having suffered minor to moderate flooding during Katrina, the Tremé is shown as eager to ‘come back’ in spite of the political controversies in the aftermath of the hurricane. The first season, entitled “Won't Bow, Don't Know How,” is set three months after the storm, and opens with an image of a horn player's mouth, warming up his reed. He is part of a group of New Orleanians, all African American, preparing for a second line parade. Regardless of the adversity they have had to overcome—finding appropriate costumes, collecting the money to pay the musicians, making sure their co-citizens will show up for the event—everyone is excited: this is the first second line parade after the storm, a visible sign of rebirth.

The following scenes bespeak human distress: many residents have not yet returned because their homes have been made uninhabitable by the flood, others are still processing the trauma of not having been able to flee the city when the storm hit, others yet are still looking for missing loved ones. Creighton Bernette (played by John Goodman), a local college professor and novelist turned political activist, embodies the anger and anguish of a whole city: in daily passionate rants on YouTube, he vents the city's frustration, his aggravation mounting every time he is confronted by the idea that the Katrina flooding was a ‘natural event.’ He articulates a view that will become mainstream in the months and years to follow: that the levees broke not because of Katrina, but because of faulty building and poor maintenance by the federal government. In one of the first season's key scenes, Creighton lays it out to a British reporter:

The flooding of New Orleans was a man-made catastrophe, a federal fuck-up of epic proportions, and decades in the making [...] The flood protection system built by the Army Corps of Engineers, aka the federal government, failed. And we've been saying for the last 40 years, since Betsy, that it was gonna fail again unless something was done. And guess what? It was not. (season 1, episode 1)

At the end of the first season, Creighton—a character loosely based on the late New Orleans blogger Ashley Morris (Goncalves 2015)—still struggling with writer's block after the flood and unable to return to a normal existence, takes his own life by jumping off a ferry into the Mississippi, almost emulating the death of his own city, which he sees as fatally left to its own fate. In one of his last YouTube appearances, he compares the massive federal resources that were made available during other moments of crisis elsewhere in America, most recently after the attacks of 9/11, with the institutional dereliction of New Orleans after Katrina:

You say, "Why rebuild it?" I say, "Fuck you." You rebuilt Chicago after the fire. You rebuilt San Francisco after the earthquake. Let me tell you something. Anything that's any fucking good in Chicago came from someplace else. And San Francisco is an overpriced cesspool with hills. [...] To New York, fuck you too. You get attacked by a few fundamentalist fucking assholes and the federal money comes raining down like rose petals. Our whole fucking coast was destroyed and we're still waiting for somebody to give a good goddamn. (season 1, episode 4)

If Creighton's personal defeat calls attention to the psychological damage caused by the hurricane on the people (as previously mentioned, suicides in New Orleans tripled post-Katrina), most of *Treme's* other characters, though, try to cope. Antoine Batiste (played by Wendell Pierce, a native New Orleanian and Katrina evacuee himself, like many others in the cast) is a philandering trombonist who struggles to find gigs, which are now hard to come by. LaDonna Baptiste-Williams tries hard to get her bar reopened for business while frantically looking for her brother, who was incarcerated in the New Orleans prison system prior to Katrina and has now gone missing—another symbol of major institutional failing during the emergency.¹ 'Big Chief' Albert Lambreaux (played by Clarke Peters, of *The Wire* fame, like

¹ Without any plans for a hurricane emergency in the city's correctional facilities, prisoners in New Orleans Parish were not evacuated prior to the storm. Only after the storm arrived were the approximately 8,000 inmates in the Orleans Parish Prison system (OPP), ranging in age from ten to seventy-three, evacuated and scattered without adequate records into thirty-four facilities across the state. Before this happened, some of the facilities in the OPP were flooded and its inmates left in the dark for days with no food, no water, and little information. Amidst the chaos of the following weeks and months, many inmates were denied due legal process and ended up spending undue weeks and months in jail, serving what came to be known as "Katrina time" (Kotey 2009, 106-115).

Pierce) attempts to rebuild his floundering home with no help from the federal government while protesting plans to demolish the relatively undamaged Calliope Projects; most of all, he seeks to re-launch his outfit, the Guardians of the Flame, one of the 38 tribes making up the real-life community of the New Orleans Mardi Gras Indians (Gendrin et al. 2012, 296).² Chef Janette Dusautel (also based on a real-life individual) tries in vain to keep her restaurant open while her insurance payments fail to materialize. Janette's boyfriend early on in the series, 'DJ Davis' MacAlary (yet another character based on a real person), hailing from privileged white status, is a staunch booster of the city's inter-racial and inter-ethnic cross fertilization: "That's how culture gets made in this country. That's how we do. We are a creole nation, whether you like it or not" (season 4, episode 3).

Davis' reverence for the city's music reflects David Simon's vision of the centrality of Jazz in the American experience, and the crucial role the Treme's 'twelve square blocks' have played in that:

African American music has conquered the world in ways that other American ideals and forms have not. We like to think we've exported representative constitutional democracy but we've exported a lot less than we claim [...] But you go into a shabean or a tavern or a pub anywhere in the world [and] African American music, which came into the world here, in twelve square blocks, has gone into the world. And it stands for us [...] It could only happen here, and it could only happen through the wonderfully miscegenated American experience. (David Simon in Bigsby 2013, 410)

Simon appears to choose Davis, a champion of the unique character and culture of the city, to reflect on the limitations of certain parochial views of New Orleans as a case of American Exceptionalism: the idealized melting pot culture that Davis tirelessly promotes emerges in the series as "perennially buckling under the pressures of racial tension and unequal neo-liberal systems" (Keeble 2016, 53). Within those tensions, however, the series relies on jazz vernacular in order to challenge dominant narratives of the Katrina crisis, articulating the vision that the city's come-back can occur not through neo-liberal policies of urban renewal (e.g. gentrification), but only by buttressing the city's cultural dimension, centering around its original cultural practices: music, food, and the Mardi Gras. In the final scene of the first episode, Antoine is driven in a cab (like many working class New Orleanians, he's obviously too poor to own a car) to a last-minute gig: a funeral. As the band members make light of the deceased, a Katrina evacuee to Houston who lost his life while committing a petty crime, the memory of the dead

² The Guardians' real-life chief, Donald Harrison, Jr., was consultant for the series (Gendrin 2012, 296).

man mixes up with the musicians' (Antoine's in particular) pressing need of the day: to make some money to get by. The sequence ideally condenses both streams of the *Treme* story: the unyielding presence of the city's native cultural practices as a marker of its exceptionality and the day-to-day struggle for survival in a place where those cultural practices fall short of providing for basic human needs.

Lastly, I turn to Benh Zeitlin's 2012 *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, a low budget, independently produced feature film which offers a more allegorical approach to the Katrina crisis by setting it within the larger discussion of endangered environments in the Gulf Coast of the United States. Adapted from a Lucy Alibar play, entitled *Juicy and Delicious* (2012), the film takes its title (originally a quotation from William Blake) from a collection of short stories by Doris Bettis, *Beasts of the Southern Wild and Other Stories*, published in 1973. Framing Katrina as a magic realist tale, as several commentators have pointed out (Bordin 2016 and Strube 2015, among others), the film is narrated through voice-over by a 6-year-old black girl named Hushpuppy who lives with her father in a precarious Southern Louisiana Bayou community, population 87, known as the Bathtub. Although the Bathtub is fictional, a painted-over sign in the film's prologue that reads "Isle de Charles Doucet" points to the real-world circumstances of the Native American Isle de Jean Charles in Terrebonne Parish, Louisiana, a swampy scrap of territory some 85 miles southwest of New Orleans that is steadily sinking into the Gulf of Mexico, and separated by a levee—as a *New York Times* reviewer has fittingly put it—"from a world of industry, consumerism and other forms of modern ugliness" (Scott 2012).

Faithful to its magic realist convention, the film shows the Bathtub residents spending their days fishing, scavenging and drinking, raising their kids to be self-sufficient and to believe in a folk religion featuring giant, ancient creatures called aurochs, while their way of life, both harsh and idyllic, is threatened first by a catastrophic hurricane and then by government interference. To this community, the man-made levees are not a solution to a problem that climate change has been making worse, but are in fact the problem: the impending hurricane threatens to wipe them out precisely because the levees built for the protection of the city to the north (obviously New Orleans, although the name is never mentioned in the film) prevent the circulation of water, causing stagnation and therefore the death of animal, plant and human life. As Ted Steinberg has explained in *Acts of God. The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America*, the building of levees and walls has actually contributed to the destructiveness of floods, because they redirect high water into the unprotected territory (Steinberg 2003, xvi).

The product of an approach to the environment that dates to the colonial origins of the founding of Louisiana, the levees reflect the formation of the social and economic order that came to define

the Americas (Eudell 2015, 196): originally built and maintained with slave labor for enabling commerce in the region, they illustrate, from the perspective of the Bayou community that *Beasts* showcases, the inseparability of questions of ecological change from those of social and economic formation that lie at the core, to quote again from Steinberg, of the “unnatural history of natural disaster” that led to Katrina. Early in the film, a shot of Hushpuppy and her dying father Wink floating on what appears to be a pristine, uncontaminated lake is overturned in the next reverse-angle shot, which reveals that father and daughter are floating against a washed-out skyline of rundown factories and smokestacks—trash littering the water, and the stained cement levee dominating the shot. Hushpuppy narrates in voiceover: “Daddy says, up above the levee, on the dry side, they’re afraid of the water like a bunch of babies. They built the wall that cuts us off. They think we’re all gonna drown down here. But we ain’t goin’ nowhere.” Two scenes later, the doomed nature of the Bathtub’s geography comes full circle as Miss Bathsheba, Hushpuppy’s teacher, lectures her students on the impending climate emergency: “Any day now the fabric of the universe is coming unraveled. Ice caps gonna melt, water gonna rise, and everything south of the levee is goin’ under. Y’all better learn how to survive now.”

Much has been made among scholars on how this film may be understood to foster a conservative dismissal of the environmental crisis (Keeble 2019 and Bordin 2016, among others). In this journal, for example, Elisa Bordin has suggested that “the film complicates the notion of civil participation and estrangement, asking its viewers to consider whether marginalization can be a choice in our society” (Bordin 2016). Relying most notably on bell hooks’s “deeply disturbed and militantly outraged” response to *Beasts*, an “acclaimed movie” she has characterized as a racist and sexist film with a “conservative agenda” that promotes the neoliberal logic that “only the strong survive” (bell hooks 2012), scholars have pointed to the way in which *Beasts* glorifies a self-reliant, anti-statist politics. According to this reading, the isolated Bathtub community sees government as useless and its laws as an impediment, and its protagonists exhibit a fiercely independent, almost libertarian attitude that advocates absolute withdrawal from state’s “services” vis-a-vis governmental failings.

Such literal reading of *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, however, appears to withhold the film’s full evocative and allegorical power. Arin Keeble has well pointed out how the film follows a double narrative trajectory in which one narrative structure, allegorical in nature, is embedded within a diegetic one. According to Keeble, the film’s primary narrative, centering on the Bathtub community and its self-sufficient ethos, contrasts with the subtext of the second structure therein contained, centering on the father and daughter relationship which she reads as an allegory of the state/citizen relationship. Wink, the father, represents state neglect,

abandonment and violence, “subtly echoing the neoliberal idea that the welfare system or public services are a drain on the nation’s economy” (Keeble 2019, 107). Hushpuppy on the other hand allegorizes not radical self-determination but, rather, marginalization and/or exclusion (Keeble 2019, 108). Reading *Beasts’* narrative structure as “intradiegetic allegory,” Keeble elevates the film to a more complex dimension of critique of state neglect and denunciation of how, in the face of radical environmental transformations, entire populations, in Henry Giroux’s words, “are now considered disposable, an unnecessary burden on state coffers, and consigned to fend for themselves” (Giroux 2006, 10).

Representations of Hurricane Katrina—one critic has written—cannot be read outside of a neoliberal context marked by New Economy market fundamentalism, state-supported assaults on the environment, intense anti-immigration rhetoric, in a nation that still celebrates itself as a global beacon of hope for the downtrodden, despite the withering role of state care for the vulnerable, and various other perversions of democracy that have flourished in recent years (Negra 2010, 1). The visual texts emerging from the Katrina crisis I have discussed appear to signal a crucial cultural moment in which the environmental crisis becomes central to narratives of modernity. In *Stormy Weather*, Giroux has made the point that Katrina broke a cycle of “visual silence” in American culture that followed the Vietnam War, where images of the “quagmire” and dying soldiers on the nightly news eventually led to the political demise of the Johnson administration. Giroux has pointed out how the Gulf Wars inaugurated a period of visual censorship over public crises in America, when the Pentagon explicitly banned images of dead returning soldiers to circulate. When the Abu Ghraib torture and prisoner abuse scandal emerged in 2004, some media outlets went as far as censoring themselves and not publishing the incriminating photos. Giroux makes the point that the Katrina crisis broke that cycle of invisibility. Each in their own different ways, the visual texts I have discussed defy the censoring of the current global crisis, and make salient Ghosh’s warnings of a “great derangement.” The shock that these images evoke—I remember being once confronted by a student, after a screening of Lee’s *When the Levees Broke*, who pointed out that images of death should not be shown in an academic setting—is a necessary wake up call for our anesthetized modern age.

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